In 1925 or 1926, the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács responded to an intellectual police action on the part of László Rudas, his former collaborator. Rudas had attacked Lukács’s heretical book *History and Class Consciousness* as subjectivist, reminding Lukács that history itself – in the shape of the development of industry, exploitation and class conflict – would take care of class consciousness. Rudas argued that ‘if proletarians do not feel more or less “class conscious” or even feel hostile to the class, then that is because their position in the economic process is itself not purely typical. Either they are not working in large factories, or they belong to the petty-bourgeois proletariat’. Yes, Rudas must be correct, joked Lukács, appearing to give way, ‘for, as we know, the technical backwardness of the American organisation of the economy is the decisive reason for their undeveloped class consciousness’. Having made his joke, Lukács then occupied the theoretical space it created. ‘But, jokes aside’, he continued, Rudas’s view ‘conceives class consciousness as a mechanical product of the
immediate economic position of the workers [and] does not consider social relations in their totality’.¹

Lukács was not the first or the last Marxist who, faced with the absurd efforts of determinist Marxism – Rudas’s ‘economicistic austerity’ – to grasp the USA, has resorted to the use of comedy as a pedagogic tool. In 1851, Engels, writing to Joseph Weydemeyer, quipped of the American workers ‘bourgeois conditions look like a beau ideal to them’.² In 1906, Werner Sombart famously remarked that the ship of American socialism had crashed on the ‘reefs of roast beef and apple pie’. And, in 1985, Irving Howe, when an ex-Marxist for sure, concluded his essay ‘Why Has Socialism Failed in America?’ in a Jewish vein of humour: ‘Henry James once said that being an American is a complex fate. We American socialists could add: he didn’t know the half of it’.³

These jokes, funnily enough, tell us much about the enduring interest of the best Marxist theory and historiography in the United States of America. In registering the gap between Marxist expectation and American reality, they keep the gap open for Marxism and keep Marxism alive to the gap. The jokes, in other words, help hold open the theoretical space for a ‘joking aside’, in which Marxism is freed up to think American complexity and stay within touching distance of American celerity.

A serious point was made by Gaston Bachelard, who was not only a philosopher of science but also of the poetic imagination and, fleetingly, of the links between the two. John Lechte has observed that Bachelard saw the danger that ‘thought and its concepts would . . . wither – sick from its very completeness and simplicity’.⁴ The imagination – and the comedic is a form of the imagination – can help ward off theoretical sterility.

‘Comedy uncovers the absurd truth which is why people are so afraid of being laughed at in real life’ said John Carey in his book on Dickens, The Violent Effigy.⁵ Lukács’s little joke exposed the absurd truth about the economicistic austerity that had sterilised Marxist theory. His joke frightened

¹ Lukács 2000, p. 68, pp. 69–70.
³ Howe 1985. For an earlier essay on the fate of American socialism, written while still a member of the US Marxist organisation, the Independent Socialist League, see Howe 1952.
⁴ Lechte 1994, p. 6.
the Comintern hierarchy. The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips reminds us that such absurd truths usually concern us and the way ‘we are always other than what we want to be’ and ‘don’t look the same as we look to ourselves’. Mockery, he observes, works on this painful gap. ‘Something about a person has to be exposed, usually something they would prefer to conceal from themselves’. 

Lukács’s use of what the Italian Marxist Sebastiano Timpanaro called the ‘feigned slip’ exposed the absurd truth that Rudas’s Marxism would ‘always be other than what it wants to be’ (a good enough guide to political practice). Next to the political complexity of the USA, the blunt theoretical tools of ‘economic austerity’ are indeed absurd.

Freud knew the pedagogic value of a good joke. Mannoni reminds us that, for Freud, wit represented simultaneously, ‘a return to the power and freedom children have . . . to play’ and an educational tool. Indeed, it is the very child-like play of wit that ‘sometimes serves to get across a too daring idea’ as it ‘captures our attention on one point to make us more perceptive on another’. Wit, it seems, is the wrapping we adults require, the display of technique we need, in order to accept the old pleasures of childish origin. The joke disinhibits. Certainly, when Lukács cracked his joke, Marxism was freighted down by mechanism, economism, and teleology, and was in need of a good laugh at itself. Lukács took that which was taboo in Second-International Marxism (and which, as John Rees has pointed out, was still taboo in much of the Third International) and – whether we judge the attempt ultimately successful or not – sought to make of it the starting point of a Marxism able to come to terms with complexity. His joke was aimed at a Marxism ‘sick from its very completeness and simplicity’.

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8 Timpanaro 1974, pp. 127–8. Timpanaro distinguishes the feigned slip from the Freudian slip by its knowingness and intentionality. He offers a telling example from Cicero in which the Senator uses the feigned slip in debate to allude to an absurd truth about Clodius and his sister.
11 Under Stalinism – an entire social system ‘sick from its completeness and simplicity’ – the joke was the joking aside. For a particularly fine example, see Žižek 2002, p. 1.
... and joking aside

The enigma of the USA has long thrust Marxists headlong into the manifold complexity of ‘social relations in their totality’. For sure, one can find in Engels the hope that history will take care of class consciousness (‘there cannot be any doubt that the ultimate platform of the American working class must and will be essentially the same as that now adopted by the whole militant working class of Europe’). But the real value in Engels’s letters to Americans are precisely his doubts not his certainties, his discussion of the wanton and aberrant and not the guaranteed. He is, in many ways, the first ‘exceptionalist’. In a letter to Friedrich A. Sorge of 2 December 1893, Engels acknowledged that ‘it is not to be denied that American conditions involve very great and particular difficulties for the steady development of a workers’ party’. He enumerated three basic ‘American conditions’, the juridico-political, the socio-cultural and the economic.

First, the Constitution, based as it is in England upon party government, which causes every vote for any candidate not put up by one of the two governing parties to be lost. And the American, like the Englishman, wants to influence his state; he does not throw his vote away.

Then, and more especially, immigration, which divides the workers into two groups: the native-born and the foreigners, and the latter in turn into (1) the Irish (2) the Germans, (3) the many small groups, each of which understands only itself: Czechs, Poles, Italians, Scandinavians etc. And then the Negroes. To form a single party out of these requires unusually powerful incentives. Often there is a sudden violent élan but the bourgeois need only wait passively and the dissimilar elements of the working class fall apart again.

Third, through the protective tariff system and the steadily growing domestic market the workers must have been exposed to a prosperity no trace of which has been seen here in Europe for years now ...
Engels often identified two further conditions acting against the formation of a workers party. The ‘ease with which the surplus population is drained off to the farms’,\textsuperscript{15} and the sectarianism of doctrinaire ‘Marxist’ organisations, often staffed by German immigrants (although history was to show native-born Marxists were often no better). The sectarian Marxist, complained Engels, ignores ‘the necessity of learning the language of the country or of getting to know American conditions properly’.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the landscape has been transformed in the intervening period, the translations, essays and reviews collected in this volume of \textit{Historical Materialism} face similar limiting horizons. While the differences are marked, the continuity with Engels’s efforts to grapple with the ‘very great and particular difficulties’ posed by ‘American conditions’ is palpable.

\textbf{The collection}

The volume opens with the first English translation of Karl Kautsky’s 1906 long essay ‘The American Worker’, an extended response published in \textit{Die Neue Zeit} to Werner Sombart’s 1905 essay ‘Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?’ A scrupulous intellectual history of Kautsky’s essay provided by Daniel Gaido highlights the impact of the 1905 Russian Revolution upon Kautsky’s political thought. Paul Le Blanc then considers Kautsky’s article as part of his critical survey of successive Marxist attempts to come to terms with the USA.

Other essays and reviews each treat the various ‘American conditions’ identified by Engels. Each is marked by an effort to come to terms with the fact that Engels’s optimism – found also in Sombart and Kautsky – that History would take care of class consciousness in the USA, has been proven misplaced. In truth, much that was then seen as ‘American’ and ‘exceptional’ is now ‘normal’, from political systems without workers’ parties to the ubiquity of mass consumerism, from the pathologies of possessive individualism to the articulation of politics by cross-class social movements. In some regards at least, it seems that the USA was showing the world the face of its own

\textsuperscript{15} Engels [1851] quoted in Howe 1985, p. 105. For Irving Howe’s argument that a uniquely American ideology, rooted in the open frontier but now with life of its own, which he terms Emersonianism, remains the most important ‘exceptional’ condition for socialists to come to terms with see Howe 1985 and 1986.

\textsuperscript{16} Engels 1990, p. 75.
future and American radicalism, it turns out, ‘has long faced the future that lay beyond’ the nineteenth-century European experience.\textsuperscript{17}

The first condition identified by Engels, the political and constitutional obstacles to the emergence of a labour party, is treated indirectly by several of the essays. In Loren Goldner’s bold and sweeping reinterpretation of US history, the unparalleled political hegemony of the American bourgeoisie is understood as the outcome of a quite exceptional historical experience in which the extensive phase of capital accumulation took place without an absolutist state and the institutional arrangements for the intensive phase of capital accumulation were put in place without the participation of a working-class political party in the state. This periodisation of the development of US capitalist development is then used to explain the political and ideological containment of the US working class, in particular to account for the great missed opportunity of the 1930s, when deep capitalist crisis and the explosive rise of the industrial trade unions failed to give birth to a workers’ party.

Engels’s awareness of the impact of immigration and the racial and ethnic division of the working class has remained central to Marxist attempts to understand the USA. Although Paul Buhle has noted that ‘Marxist doctrine in its internationalist abstraction has run up against a vast tide of complex group loyalties and vernaculars’\textsuperscript{18} many twentieth-century Marxists, from W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James to Max Shachtman and Theodore Allen have laboured hard to make sense of this ‘vast tide’ and, in particular, to elaborate the full theoretical and political implications of Engels worrying bald sentence, ‘And then the Negroes’.\textsuperscript{19} The ethno-religious polarisation of the working class is examined here in Noel Ignatiev’s critique of ‘whiteness’ studies and in Bryan Palmer’s sparkling review essay of Martin Scorsese’s film about the feuding immigrant and native \textit{Gangs of New York}.

The contemporary meaning of the third ‘American condition’ identified by Engels is explored in Resnick and Wolff’s exciting research into the exceptional combination of rising consumption and increasing exploitation experienced by the US working class. Peter Hudis explores the relation between worker and intellectual in the age of automation, highlighting the sustained militancy

\textsuperscript{17} Buhle 1987, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Buhle 1987, p. 13.
and social consciousness of the US proletariat which, he suggests, has been underestimated due to the singular concern for a missing labour party.

Engels laboured long to combat, both in the USA and in Great Britain, the terrible influence of doctrinaire and sectarian forms of Marxism. In this volume, Alan Johnson draws upon Étienne Balibar’s concept of *égaliberté* to sketch the outline of an equalibertarian Marxism that might help put some substance back into the revolutionary project here in the West. Marcus Rediker’s and Peter Linebaugh’s marvellous recent history of the radical Atlantic, reviewed here by Bryan Palmer, might be read as an extended confirmation of Balibar’s claim that the overarching political and historical fact established by the democratic revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – a fact which forms the political horizon of an equalibertarian Marxism – is that equality and liberty ‘depend upon one another in practice’ and can only be realised ‘from below’. The 1930s writings of Sidney Hook, which remain one peak of achievement in US Marxist theory, also saw Marxism as the inheritor of the promise of the bourgeois revolutions. His best book *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* (1933) is discussed in this volume by his intellectual biographer Christopher Phelps. The exchange between Sharon Smith and Nelson Lichtenstein, prompted by Lichtenstein’s acclaimed history of US labour in the twentieth century, *State of the Union*, ranges over many issues but its political centre of gravity is the relation of labour’s missing party to the record of the Communist Party (USA) and the Democratic Party, while the central event in dispute is, again, the missed opportunity of the 1930s. And translations of two short pieces by Franz Mehring cast a sideways light on the difficulty of implanting Marxism ‘on native ground’.

Penetrating reviews by Moody, McQuire and Friedman subject the ‘exceptionalist’ thesis to searching critique while Wald, Lieberman and Barnfield explore episodes in oppositional cultural practice.

The editors do not claim that this collection is comprehensive. We regret the absence of articles from Marxist feminists in particular and plan to address this lacuna, and to carry further discussion of the contemporary American

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20 Hook 1933 acknowledged an affinity to Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* which he read in German (see p. 9). However Hook observed that Lukács ‘links Marx up – unfortunately much too closely – with the stream of German classical philosophy’ and insisted that there was ‘nothing a priori in Marx’s philosophy; it is naturalistic, historical and empirical throughout’ (p. 17).

21 Lichtenstein 2002.
worker and the dynamics of race and racism in the USA, in future volumes of *Historical Materialism* (and, of course, we are open to any proposals you the reader may have for us). The task could not be more urgent. If the duel between the US hyperpower and the fundamentalists is not to set the terms of world politics then much rests with the American proletariat, the most powerful and largest in the world. Ernest Mandel correctly identified ‘a destruction of the socialist tradition in the American working class’. How can this catastrophe be reversed? How can the American working class begin to make itself as an independent political force? How should the terrain of politics in the USA – from a shifting social structure to new patterns of consumption, exploitation, and identity, and from cultural bifurcation to the crack-up of the two-party system – be mapped? And how acted upon? What resources have historical-materialist theory and historiography to bring to these questions?

References


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I. Two models for the development of Germany

In his ‘Studies in the Historical Development of the North American Proletariat’, which Sombart published in the Archive for the Social Sciences (Vol. XXI, Nos. 1–3), he remarks:

The United States is the country with the most advanced capitalist development, so that its economic structure represents our future. What Marx correctly stated about England in 1867, we may now apply to America: De te fabula narratur, Europa [About you, Europe, is the story being told], when we are reporting about conditions in America, at least as far as capitalist development is concerned.2

This assertion can be accepted only with great reservations. A country which, like England in the sixties [of the nineteenth century], could serve in every respect as a classical model of capitalist society and all its tendencies – such a country does not exist
anymore. When Marx studied England, it had not only the most developed capitalist class but also the most advanced proletariat; that is why it showed in the most consummate way not only the tendencies of capitalist exploitation and organisation, but also the counter-tendencies of proletarian rebellion and organisation. Thus England was the first state to develop, in the most definite way, a socialist party (Chartism), a trade-union movement, a proletarian co-operative movement, and legislation for the protection of the workers.

Today there is a whole series of countries in which capital controls the entirety of economic life; but none of them has developed all the aspects of the capitalist mode of production to the same extent. In particular, there are two states, which face each other as extremes, in which one of the two elements of this mode of production is disproportionately strong, i.e. stronger than it should be according to its level of development: in America, the capitalist class; in Russia, the working class.

In America, we can speak more than anywhere else about the dictatorship of capital. In contrast, nowhere has the fighting proletariat reached such significance as in Russia, and this significance must and will increase, because this country has just now begun to take part in the modern class struggle.

Germany’s economy is closest to the American model; its politics, on the other hand, is closest to the Russian. In this way, both countries show us our future; it will have a half-American, half-Russian character. The more we study Russia and America, and the better we understand both, the most clearly we will be able to comprehend our own future. The American example alone would be as misleading as the Russian.

It is certainly a peculiar phenomenon that the Russian proletariat [of all national sections of the working class] should show us our future – as far as, not the organisation of capital, but the rebellion of the working class is concerned – because Russia is, of all the great states of the capitalist world, the most backward. This seems to contradict the materialist conception of history, according to which economic development constitutes the basis of politics. But, in fact, it only contradicts that kind of historical materialism of which our opponents and critics accuse us, by which they understand a ready-to-hand model, and not a method of inquiry. They reject the materialist conception of history only because they are unable to understand it and to apply it fruitfully.
II. Russian capitalism

The disproportionate strength of the Russian proletariat must be ascribed to two reasons: the lack of a strong native capitalist class, and the need to carry out a political revolution.

Capitalism has developed in the Russian empire on a different basis than in Western Europe. In the West, a strong urban bourgeoisie developed before the growth of royal absolutism through a struggle against the landowning aristocracy and the clergy. Bourgeoisie and absolutism grew stronger together. The surplus of the productive classes, which under commodity production took increasingly the form of surplus-value, could not be pocketed in its entirety by monarchs, aristocrats and priests; they had to leave a part for the urban bourgeoisie. What monarchs and aristocrats swallowed, was wasted in military campaigns and ostentation. What the church took was either spent in luxuries or accumulated as treasure. The bourgeoisie, however, transformed its share of the plunder of the native and foreign working classes into capital, which it constantly accumulated. The smaller the power of monarchs, aristocrats and priests, the greater the power of the bourgeoisie in the country, the more rapid was (all other conditions being equal) the accumulation, the self-expansion of capital. On the other hand, the more rapidly the accumulation proceeded, the greater was – to a certain extent – the number and above all the power of the capitalists vis-à-vis, not only the propertyless and dominated, but also the property-owning, dominant non-capitalist classes, and the greater was their control over the state.

The development of Russia was different. The power of Czarism did not grow simultaneously with the strengthening of a bourgeoisie or as a result of it. The Russian state rather came into being as a purely agrarian state, as a régime of Asiatic despotism tightly connected with Western Europe precisely at a time when absolutism there had succeeded in subjugating the church and the nobility, had created its own organs of government through a standing army and a bureaucracy, and was becoming increasingly distrustful, if not outright hostile, to the rising bourgeoisie. Russian despotism recognised immediately how valuable the means of government of Western European absolutism, a standing army and a bureaucracy, could be, and it introduced them in Russia as rapidly as possible. That was above all the famous civilisational role of Peter the Great. The first and best tools employed to strengthen the oriental despotism of the Czars with the help of the means of coercion of capitalist civilisation and make it the equal of Western European
absolutism were supplied by Frenchmen and especially Germans. In terms of internal politics, however, this meant that, in order to increase the power of the Czar, the surplus of the productive classes had to be taken away, and the number of unproductive expenditures increased to defray the expenses of soldiers and bureaucrats. Peter I increased the burden of taxation five times. The civilisation of Russia thus meant a strengthening of the means of plunder, not an increase of its capitalist wealth as in Western Europe. A substantial capitalist class could not develop under these circumstances.

The economic development of the country was therefore extraordinarily slow, whereas to the extent that the Czars continued with their ‘civilisational’ process and tightened their connection with Western Europe, their share in the politics of the great European states grew. The Russian Empire had to keep pace in arms expenditure with the rapidly growing capitalist states, while the economic distance between them increased all the time. The result was an incredible financial mismanagement already in the eighteenth century. The two methods used by the governments of the capitalist states to obtain money were profusely employed: loans and money forgery (the printing of irredeemable paper money is nothing else). If credit was low and nobody wanted to lend money, then the printing press was brought into use. If the state found creditors, the fabrication of counterfeit money could rest for a while. If no other alternative was feasible, then a little state bankruptcy was tried, as in 1843, when the old paper money was taken out of circulation and replaced by a new one – with this proviso, however, that only one new ruble was received in exchange for three-and-a-half old rubles.

The mortgaging of the state thus grew uninterruptedly. It is true that the growth of the national debt is not a Russian invention, and that some bourgeois economists even believe that a big national debt is the basis of national prosperity. Under certain conditions, there is a grain of truth in this assertion. The interest of the national debt is in fact an eternal payment of tribute from the state to the capitalists. It means that the state exploits the productive classes in order to increase the profits of capital. The growth of the national debt thus means a growth of the proletariat on the one hand and of capital on the other hand. If the capitalists to whom the state is indebted reside within its boundaries, the national debt can become a means to promote the development of capitalist production, whose elements (proletarians and capitalists) increase as a result of the payment of interest. This impoverishes
the workers, but enriches the capitalist class, and develops capitalist production. The effects of the national debt are however completely different when the state creditors reside outside the state. The payment of the interest of the national debt is in this case only a constant drain of money to foreign countries at the expense of the impoverished local population; it produces indeed local proletarians, but only foreign capitalists. That is what happened in Turkey and in the Russian Empire.

There is, however, a difference between these two countries. Turkey has become so helpless that it must inevitably submit to the dictate of foreigners. It exists as an independent state only thanks to the jealousy of the different powers, none of which can have the whole booty alone. They all agree, however, in plundering the unlucky land and forcing their own products onto it, thus hindering the development of any kind of local industry. As a result of this, we see in the Turkish economy, as in the Russian, a progressive decay of agriculture and a growth in the number of proletarians, but in Turkey these proletarians can find no employment in capitalist industry. The most passive among them turn to begging; the most energetic become bandits and rebels, which never die out in Turkey, no matter how many of them are executed.

But Russia was not as helpless as Turkey. As soon as the Russian government realised what power capitalist industry confers upon the state, it tried to promote the industrial development of the country. It certainly did not lack proletarians: the land had millions of beggars and peasants looking for jobs. But where was the necessary capital to be found? It was impossible to find it in Russia. Foreign capital had to be attracted in order to build railways, open mines, erect blast furnaces, spinning mills, weaving mills, sugar refineries, etc. And, since surplus capital in Western Europe, the surplus-value fleece out of the local workers and the foreign possessions, had grown so much by the eighties [of the nineteenth century] that it could not find enough investment possibilities at home and was being sent at serious risk to such places as Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Venezuela: why not send it to Russia? Thus, with mostly foreign capital, heavy industry was created in Russia, which grew with special rapidity in the last two decades. This transformed a great part of the Russian proletarians from lumpenproletarians or indigent small peasants into wage-workers, from timid and servile beggars and servants into decided revolutionary fighters. But this growth of a strong fighting proletariat was
not paralleled by the growth of a similarly strong Russian capitalist class. These facts gave the class struggle of the proletariat in the empire of the Czars an altogether peculiar character.

When the Russian proletariat fights against capital, it fights to a great extent against the foreigners, against the exploiters that impoverish and weaken the whole of Russia, that take out all the surplus-value that the land produces. The proletariat is thus the champion of the common interests of Russian society.

On the other hand, the Czar, with his whole paraphernalia of soldiers, Cossacks and tschinovniks [bureaucrats], appears as the representative of the interests of the foreigners that exploit the entirety of Russia. The modern government is everywhere the army of the capitalists, but Russian absolutism is the army of foreign capital. It is the representative of the interests of European finance against the Russian people, which it plunders in order to hand over meekly the lion’s share of the booty to Western European capitalists. That is, in a sense, one of the sources of strength of the present Russian government. The international usurers know what servile representative of their interests they have in absolutism, and therefore they support it with all their might, though they know the kind of swindlers they are dealing with. But, precisely because of this, the politically conscious population of Russia knows very well that it cannot get away from this state of pauperisation and misery without overthrowing absolutism, and, since the country has no strong capitalist class able to oppose the ruinous policy of the government, the struggle for the interests of the entire Russia falls on the shoulders of the only strong modern class it possesses: the industrial proletariat. In this way, the Russian workers are able to exert a strong political influence, and the struggle for the liberation of the land from the strangling octopus of absolutism has become a duel between the Czar and the working class; a duel, in which the peasants provide an indispensable assistance, but in which they can by no means play a leading role.

III. Native and foreign capital

The analysis of the social and political effects of capital coming from abroad, as distinguished from capital locally accumulated, never occupied a prominent place in classical political economy or even in the works of Marx. Ricardo indicated, in the seventh chapter of his *Principles of Political Economy and
Taxation, how difficult it was for capital to overcome the barriers to the export of capital. These barriers have almost completely disappeared in modern times.

Theory must investigate the problem of the effects of capital in its most simple form, leaving aside, for instance, the existence of foreign countries, and proceeding under the assumption that there is only one capitalist community – much as it distinguishes between capitalists and wage-workers and ignores the presence of other classes, which are of great significance for the social and political praxis. Only after these capitalist relations are comprehended in their most simple form is it possible to investigate and understand their more complex manifestations.

The power of capital over wage-labour is evident. The more capital accumulates and large-scale enterprise develops, the more the means of production will be the monopoly of the capitalist class, the greater will be the propertyless masses and the more impossible will be for them to win their livelihood in any other way but through the sale of their labour-power to the sole owners of the means of production. All that is well known.

But the more the capitalist mode of production develops and the mass of capital grows, the more dependent on capital will be also the non-capitalist, property-owning and dominant classes, which are able through their positions of power to appropriate part of the surplus-value, and often even of the value of the labour force. That is the origin of the ground rent of the landlords, of the taxes of the princes, etc. Their feudal traditions and their social and political functions in contemporary society induce these classes to spend as much money as possible – one has only to think, for instance, about the arms race. They therefore find themselves in constant need of money, and must time and time again borrow from those classes which accumulate capital, under whose dominion they consequently fall, no matter how much hate and contempt they feel towards their creditors.

Finally, the power of capital rests upon the position of dependence on which every unproductive class is placed – not only those who live a useless parasitic life like the landlords, but also those which are very active and play an exceptionally useful, sometimes even indispensable role in society.

The personal consumption of the members of the dominant and exploiting classes is usually insignificant; and it is relatively smaller, the more the rate of exploitation grows. A large part of the surplus generated by the productive classes and appropriated by the exploiting classes is used to maintain a
stratum of unproductive workers. On this stratum rests to a great extent the social and political power of the exploiters. For instance, what the medieval landlords squeezed out of the peasants was not consumed by them alone, but used to maintain vassals and subordinates, buffoons and prostitutes, troubadours and astrologers, chaplains and stable-hands, etc. Since all these lived from the produce of the exploitation of the productive classes, they faced the population as defenders of the exploitation system.

The more the capitalist mode of production develops, and the more capital comes to the fore as a means of exploitation, the greater will be the number of unproductive workers employed by it. Accumulation is the main aim of the capitalists, to which they subordinate all others. As long as capital is scanty, and its profit small, the capitalist is stingy in his personal consumption, he is puritanical and full of contempt, not only for senseless luxury and pomp, but also for serious art and science. But the more capital and the rate of exploitation grow, the easier becomes for the capitalist to let accumulation go ahead at full speed and at the same time to increase his personal consumption and feed an army of unproductive workers, lackeys of all sorts, learned and unlearned, aesthetic and unaesthetic, ethical and cynical.

These unproductive workers play a crucial role in the defence of exploitation, in which they have themselves an indirect interest. They diminish the number of productive, directly exploited workers, the fighters against exploitation. To them belongs also a great part of the intelligentsia, which influences the thoughts and feelings of the people through their speeches, writings, and works of art. Finally, these strata constitute the ladder most easily accessible to the exploited in order to rise above the reach of exploitation to a position closer to that of the dominant classes. The wider these strata, the greater the possibilities to rise to them from below, the more numerous will be the elements among the exploited which will attempt to better their position in this way instead of doing it through an energetic class struggle, the more powerful will be the influence which these unproductive workers exert on the views of the productive workers.

How do these relations turn out, in those places where capital does not come from within the country, but from abroad, so that the surplus-value that it extracts also goes to foreign countries?

The opposition between entrepreneurs and wage-workers, as well as between usurers and debtors, will become most evident, will be most easily understood and most oppressively felt, when both parts belong to different nations. That
is true when both parts come into personal contact, when both live in the same land, as when, for instance, in Russia the factory owner or the factory director are Jews as opposed to non-Jews, or Germans as opposed to Slavs. But, in the case of non-personal capital, such as state loans or joint-stock companies, this personal opposition is from the outset excluded.

On the other hand, as we have already remarked, the drain of capital to foreign lands leads to an impoverishment of the whole country, of all classes, not only of those productively occupied. It is true that the first effect of capital coming from abroad is to increase the amount of capital in the country, to expand the demand for means of production and the number of workers employed in their production, and consequently also to increase the consumption of objects of personal consumption. Gradually, however, such economic expansion implies a growing drain of surplus-value to foreign countries, which can at most be only temporarily concealed by extensive capital imports.

The effect of foreign loans that bring practically no capital into the state, and whose function is, for instance, the payment of interest owed to foreign creditors, or the unproductive purchase of products of foreign industry, such as cannons or warships, is, from the very beginning, the impoverishment of the land.

At first the growing indebtedness of Russia to foreign countries, in the eighties [of the nineteenth century], seemed to inaugurate an era of economic growth. And there are still people foolish enough to believe that, if peace and order are established in Russia, they will bring about economic prosperity – without disturbing the present bureaucratic-military régime or the rising indebtedness to foreign countries resulting from it.

But it is evident from the outset, that a land with a capitalist industry where the capital comes chiefly from abroad must lack a considerable stratum of unproductive workers (servants and intellectuals) dependent on capital. The number of unproductive workers may be large in absolute terms, but capital will have less influence on them. If they are employed in domestic service, they will mainly depend on other classes – on landowners, for instance. If they are intellectuals, they will live in poverty, but they will be more independent from capitalist sensibilities and ideas.

The capitalists have an influence only on those strata among which they spend their surplus-value, not on those from whom they draw it. A French financier bold enough to spend his money on Russian government securities
or on Russian industrial or railway shares, will employ not Russian but French servants; will amuse himself with French, not with Russian actresses; will be the Maecenas of French musicians, painters, poets; will receive in his salons French, not Russian politicians and scholars; and will patronise, if he is pious or wants to preserve religion for the masses, French instead of Russian cloisters; he will corrupt French, not Russian journalists. The surplus-value produced in Russia will thus serve to increase his influence in France, not in Russia.

This is an important reason why the majority of the intelligentsia nowhere has, on the one hand, a lower standard of living, and, on the other hand, a greater independence from capital, a stronger opposition to it, a greater understanding of the proletariat, and a more ardent devotion to its cause, than in Russia.

Most of those strata whose role in Western Europe is to put to sleep and distort the class consciousness of the proletariat, work untiringly in Russia in order to enlighten the proletariat about its class position. Nowhere is the number of theoretically educated socialist agitators greater than in the land of the illiterate.

If the proletariat in Russia, in its struggle against capital and its tool, absolutism, represents the urgent interests of the entire society more than in any other country, it is also more than any other proletariat led by a large army of representatives of modern scientific thought and research, and taught and inspired by modern artistic experience.

**IV. English capitalism**

Completely different from Russia are the effects of capitalist development in a country like England, where, during the last decades, the market for the products of industry and industry itself have grown slowly, but the mass of surplus-value which flows into the hands of the capitalist class and therefore also the accumulation of capital are colossal; where every year a constantly growing mass of capital, instead of becoming industrial capital at home, flows to foreign countries as money-capital, in order to assume there the form of unproductive state loans or of industrial or mercantile capital.

The number of capitalists in such a land will be disproportionately greater than its degree of industrial development. Under certain circumstances, their numbers can increase even more quickly than the number of proletarians, but one must be careful not to take this case as typical of all capitalist societies.
Each extreme can exist in a given country only to the extent that the opposite extreme develops in another country.

To a disproportionately large number of capitalists corresponds also a disproportionately large number of servants, as well as of members of the so-called liberal professions. According to the 1895 census, the German Empire numbered 57.8 million inhabitants and 22.1 million gainfully employed persons, of whom 1,340,000 (6.1 per cent of the gainfully occupied persons) were domestic servants, and 795,000 (3.6 per cent) were public servants or professionals. In England (leaving aside Scotland and Ireland), by way of contrast, the 1901 census shows 32.5 million inhabitants and 14.3 million gainfully employed persons, of which 1,995,000 (13.9 per cent) were domestic servants and 804,000 (5.6 per cent) were public servants or professionals. Both categories together comprised therefore in Germany 9.7 percent, and in England 19.5 percent of gainfully employed persons – i.e. almost twice as much. It is remarkable that English agriculture includes only 8 per cent of the gainfully employed persons, much less than the number of servants!

In the Netherlands, too, where capital invested abroad also plays a large role, we find that 10.3 per cent of gainfully employed persons are servants and 5.4 per cent are public servants or professionals. England and Holland are the countries with the proportionally highest number of intellectuals.

If the members of these strata of the population are more numerous in England than anywhere else, they are also dependent on capital to the highest degree. Leaving aside the domestic servants, the English artists, scholars and writers are more than anywhere else within the sphere of influence of capitalism; first, because a much larger proportion of them is economically dependent on the capitalists, and secondly, because an unusually large number of members of the liberal professions are directly interested in capitalist exploitation.

In contradistinction to the industrial or commercial entrepreneur, the money-capitalist – for instance, the owner of state bonds or shares – is in the agreeable position of having to dedicate virtually no time to the administration of his property. A bank demands a minimal amount of administrative work from its owners. Next to the landowners, the money-capitalist is the most idle and superfluous person in capitalist society. That gives him the opportunity, of which he generally makes extensive use, of killing his time in the most stupid ways possible. To enjoy with taste and intelligence, as did many aristocracies in lands of ancient culture such as Athens or France, is beyond the capabilities
of the modern capitalists, as especially the American financial magnates have shown in the most striking manner. But wherever the number of money-capitalists is large, there will always be found some who will use their idle time to occupy themselves with artistic and scientific work, or will take an interest in its promotion.

Moreover, the development of non-personal money capital invested in bank, railway or industrial shares, and in federal, state or city bonds, creates the possibility of transforming even the smallest amounts of money into money capital. That makes little impression on the wage-workers, because their opposition to the capitalists who exploit them is too strong for the interest they can receive from their meagre savings to bring about a reconciliation between the two classes. But it has a strong influence on the members of the intelligentsia, who often possess relatively large amounts of money, stand much closer to the capitalist class in their standard of living and social connections, and generally do not feel exploited by them.

All these circumstances mean that capitalist ideas and sensibilities are highly developed in the English intelligentsia. While the Russian intellectuals still preserve a strong communist sensibility, so that, for instance, the sharing of momentary surpluses with their comrades appears as something natural to them, among the English intelligentsia the bourgeois striving to accumulate every scrap of surplus in order to turn it into capital prevails. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that there are only a few English intellectuals from whom the proletariat can obtain a more profound insight into its class position, into its class interests and tasks, than it can gain from its everyday experience.

But not only is the proportion of domestic servants, public servants and professionals in England higher and more dependent on capital than anywhere else. The large capital exports, which give rise to a strong influx of surplus-value into the country, also make the opposition of the proletariat to the capitalist system weaker than it should be according to its degree of industrial development. While, in a place like Russia or India, capitalist exploitation leads to the constant impoverishment of the country, in England, it is a means of enriching the country, of accumulating a perpetually growing booty through the plundering of the whole world. Even the propertyless classes benefit in many ways from this plunder. The greater the surplus-value coming from foreign lands, the larger the amounts of money flowing into the state and the communities in the form of taxes, and the greater the possibilities of treating the poor with consideration or of increasing the number of public
works. If England is still the land of free trade, this is partially due to the growing exploitation of foreign countries. The same is true of Holland. Protective duties are a tribute paid to the capitalists and taken from the consumption of the great masses of the people. In England, the mass of surplus-value which the capitalist class receives yearly from foreign countries is so enormous that is can relinquish the use of this means to bleed the people. For money capital as for mercantile capital, protective tariffs are not a means to increase its profits as they are for industrial capital. Thanks to the preponderance of the former forms of capital, England retains its free-trade policy and rejects protectionism, which heightens the class opposition between proletarians and capitalists.

The mass of surplus-value flowing into the country also makes easier the practice of charity, which is nowhere as highly developed as in England. To be sure, the lion’s share of this money falls into the hands of the scions of the possessing classes and the members of the intelligentsia; the administrative costs of philanthropic institutions in England are enormous. What remains for those really in need is relatively little and incapable of checking in any significant sense the frightful poverty, constantly aggravated by unemployment, but it is enough to blunt the opposition of many workers to the capitalist system.

It is true that the opposition between the proletariat and industrial capital in England has been growing since the 1880s, i.e. since the period when British industry lost its control over the world market and began to be exposed to the sharp competition of the new industrial states, which constantly becomes more dangerous. But the English workers find it difficult to widen their struggle against the industrial entrepreneur into a struggle against the whole capitalist system of exploitation. They turn against particular manifestations of it, such as the sweatshops or unemployment, without asking themselves how these are connected to the totality of capitalist society, and without opposing this society in all its manifestations, without attacking all its fortified positions. During the Boer War, chauvinism found almost no energetic opposition in the country. Even some socialists paid tribute to imperialism on that occasion. The lamentations of India fall on deaf ears among them. The new Labour Party wants to remain independent from both Liberals and

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3 During the South African, or Boer, War (1899–1902), Great Britain fought against the Dutch colonists in the Transvaal and Orange Free State.
Conservatives, but refuses to adopt a definite programme, out of fear that it might be a socialist one. And even Keir Hardie felt compelled to criticise the idea of class struggle some years ago.\footnote{James Keir Hardie (1856–1915), a British labour leader, was elected to Parliament in 1892 as an Independent and in 1906 led the Labour Party in the House of Commons.}

So, contrary to Russia, nowhere is capitalism stronger, nowhere socialist ideas find more obstacles to reach the workers, than in a country in which two thirds of the gainfully employed persons are industrial or railway workers.

To be sure, English capitalism will suffer a terrible collapse the moment the oppressed lands rebel and refuse to continue paying tribute. If England loses India, Egypt, and South Africa, a mass of surplus-value, which today enriches it, must remain abroad; a higher level of state and community taxation will be shifted onto the shoulders of the working class; industrial capital will win a decisive voice, and immediately sharpen the contradiction between capital and workers to the highest degree. If it does not come even sooner, socialism will then become inevitable in England. Till then, however, it must conduct a harder struggle for supremacy there than in much more backward countries.

V. Capitalism in the United States

The United States represents another special kind of development. As a capitalist land it is not older than Russia. According to Bryce, in the period between 1830 and 1840 there were in America few great fortunes and almost no poverty. In 1845 there were for the first time in Philadelphia 10 millionaires; in New York in 1855 there were only 28. It was the Civil War that began in 1861, which suddenly brought the capitalists to power. Since then, the accumulation and concentration of capital have been developing at tremendous speed. In 1892, there were, according to Cleveland Moffett’s report in the \textit{Wilshire’s Magazine}, 200 millionaires in Philadelphia, and 2,000 in New York. ‘In terms of her capital base – that is, the amount of her capital accumulation,’ says Sombart in his already mentioned article, the United States (despite her comparative youth) is today beyond all other countries. . . . The total banking power of the United States, made up of capital, surplus profit, deposits, and circulation, is estimated by the same source to be $13,826,000, while the corresponding figures for all the other
countries in the world taken together are reckoned to amount to only $19,781,000. The amount of capital that has therefore flowed into industry alone within the last twenty years should not surprise us. According to the Census, the amounts of capital invested in manufactures in 1880, 1890 and 1900 were as follows:

1880: $2,790,272,606
1890: $6,525,050,759
1900: $9,831,486,506

The concentration of capital comes to light clearly in the enormous size which the American trusts have reached. Sombart describes them as they appear in the work of Moody on the trusts, published in 1904, and summarises the results in the following words: ‘If one adds together all these giant combinations, within which by far the largest part of American economic life is included, one arrives at the enormous total of 8,664 “controlled” subsidiaries and $20,379,000,000 in capital assets. Just think! Eighty-five thousand million marks concentrated in the hands of a few capitalists.’

Comrade Simons, in his recently published excellent work, which offers a short synopsis of the socio-economic development of the United States from its origins, estimates the contemporary fortunes of the trusts to be even greater: thirty billion dollars, i.e. 85,000,000 marks.

The personal fortune of the richest of the magnates of finance, John D. Rockefeller, alone, is estimated to be more than one billion dollars, a sum equal to the compensations paid by France to Germany [as a result of the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War] – an amount of money then unheard of, which many doubted whether wealthy France would be able to raise.

True, John Rockefeller’s fortune far surpasses those of his fellow magnates. The nine richest among them (Andrew Carnegie, Marshall Field, W.R. Vanderbilt, J.J. Astor, J.P. Morgan, Russell Sage, J.J. Hill, William A. Clarke, and William Rockefeller) only possess together about as much as he does. The capital they can command or ‘control’ is, however, much greater than the capital they possess.

Where does this fabulous growth of capital come from?

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5 Sombart 1976, pp. 5–6.
6 Moody 1968.
7 Sombart 1976, p. 6.
8 Simons 1907, p. 116. [Kautsky quotes the same figure from the second edition of Simons’s book, published in 1906.]
In the first place, it comes from the fact that the American bourgeoisie does not have to share its surplus-value with any other significant power, which will squander its portion unproductively. Thanks to the enormous stretches of unoccupied land, there was until recently no ground rent of consequence in the United States, no class of landowners able to appropriate for themselves a part of the surplus-value in order to waste it as the European feudal landowners do. I am ignoring here the Southern planters, whose régime came to an end when that of the capitalists began. Besides, the United States had the good fortune of being so far from European quarrels and free from the dangers of an invasion that it did not have to sacrifice much for militarism. Its navy and army were small. The American Army numbered in 1870 only 35,000 men, in 1903, 60,000. This army, composed of conscripts, was relatively expensive, but the country was spared the bloodletting caused in Europe by the unproductive employment of so many of its best workers. In the German Empire alone, there are at present more than 600,000 men who are removed from the production process in that way. Let us suppose that each one of them can produce an annual value of 2,000 marks (wages and surplus-value in its different forms): that means that the German people loses yearly through militarism, besides the billions which the army costs, another two billion in wasted productive capacity.

If, in addition to that, one considers the amounts of money which are squandered yearly by the feudal landowners as ground rent (the ground rent yearly pocketed by the landowners in England is estimated to be 300 million pounds sterling, i.e. six billion marks), one gets for Germany alone – though the same is true of the other European states – a huge sum which is taken away from the economy every year through the existence of private property in land and militarism, and which could have been employed either to raise the personal consumption of the working class or to increase the accumulation of capital.

No wonder that, in the United States, where those burdens do not exist, capital grows far more quickly than in Europe, and that they are outstripping Europe more and more.

In opposition to England, this capital remains within the country and serves principally for the development of industry, because while the expansion of the market for English industry has been constantly slowing down, the market for American industry has been growing rapidly. This is once again due to great amount of free, still unappropriated lands, as well as to the insignificance of the burdens that weigh upon the American farmers. Thanks to the high
rates of natural growth of the population as well as to immigration, one had only to open up these lands for cultivation in order to increase the number of farms and therefore the size of the internal market.

This was done through the construction of railways in deserted territories. The railroads in America have an entirely different significance for the expansion of industry and its market than in Europe.

The whole of Europe had 296,000 kilometres of railways in 1902, Germany, 53,7000, the United States alone, by contrast, had 326,000.

The number of people gainfully occupied in agriculture grew in the United States in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gainfully Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>5,948,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>7,713,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>8,565,926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>10,381,765</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Increase from 1870 to 1900**: 4,433,204

On the other hand, we find in England the following figures for this social stratum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gainfully Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>1,657,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>1,383,184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>1,336,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>1,152,495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Decrease from 1871 to 1901**: 504,643

In Germany, there have been no figures available for a long time. Those at our disposal show a standstill in the number of productive persons employed in agriculture, and a diminution in the total number of people belonging to this sector of the economy.

The figures for the agricultural population of the German Empire are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gainfully Employed</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>8,236,496</td>
<td>19,225,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>8,292,692</td>
<td>18,501,307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Increase or Decrease**: + 56,196 – 724,148
The agricultural population of America therefore grows in an entirely different way from that of Europe. Moreover, not only its rate of growth but also its consumption capacity is different from that of the agricultural population of Europe. The American farmer is totally unlike the English agricultural labourer or the Russian or even German small peasant. He usually has at his disposition as much land as he can cultivate, and from the value he produces he had to pay virtually no ground rent (either as rent \textit{Pachtzins} or mortgage payments) only two decades ago, which to a large extent is still true today. He also had to give less money to the state than the European peasant, and was free from the labour-force tribute represented by compulsory military service. Most of the value he produced remained therefore with him, and he used it either for his personal consumption or in order to renew and improve his technical apparatus: in both cases he supplied a market for industry. Moreover, the railways with their immense needs also constituted an ever-growing clientele for industry. The railways, however, were intimately related with agriculture, since their profitability depended mostly on the transportation of agricultural produce.

These peculiar American conditions not only favoured the accumulation of capital to the highest degree; they also enabled this enormous mass of accumulated capital to find employment at home, and especially in industry – including the railways.

The entire capitalist class therefore had, directly or indirectly, the highest interest in the greatest exploitation of the working class, because on that depended the volume of its profits. It was more united and hostile toward the working class than in England, where money and mercantile capital often have interests different from those of industrial capital, and where their profits partially come from other sources besides the exploitation of local workers.

\textbf{VI. The national divisions of American workers}

If the American capitalists constitute a much more homogeneous class than in England, nowhere is the working class more heterogeneous than in the United States.

That is also a result of the superabundance of land that prevailed till recently in the Union. Without great expenditure, every healthy American with any understanding of agriculture was able to become an independent farmer and thus avoid being exploited by capital as a wage-worker. The American-born
population therefore supplied only few workers; and, since capital and the market for industry both grew very quickly, the demand for wage-workers was very great, while its supply from the ranks of the native-born population remained small.

From the outset, the wages of the American workers had to be high, because the above-described social relations enabled the farmers to produce and keep for themselves a very considerable mass of produce. In *Capital*, Marx remarked, in his analysis of the value of the labour-power, that ‘in contradistinction to the case of other commodities, there enters into the determination of the value of the labour power a historical and moral element.’ But this element has a natural basis, and that is the national average yield of the small peasant estate. The small peasantry is the great supplier of additional labour-power for the capitalists: it produces in most states a numerous progeny, which cannot find its livelihood in agriculture and ends up in industry; so that wages for simple, unskilled work in industry are determined by the living standards of the sons of the small peasants, and of the farm-hands of the rich peasants, which flow into it. The work of peasants and farm hands is by no means a simple one. On the contrary, it is very complicated, and requires a long apprenticeship. But, for industry, this apprenticeship is useless: in industry, the wage-workers coming from agriculture are, as a rule, employed at first only as unskilled workers.

The living standards of the peasant, however, depend on the extension and quality of the soil which he has at his disposal, the efficacy of his instruments and methods of labour, and finally on the share which he has to hand over to the landowners, the clergy, and the state.

In the last analysis, these social relations determine the foundation of wages. That they are nowhere more favourable than in America requires, after what has been said, no further explanation. The American farmer has plenty of land at his disposal, fertile land, having to pay few taxes, and without the drain of labour force represented by military service. This land supplies a sufficient surplus for the acquisition of efficient instruments of labour, which, in turn, increase agricultural production, and popular education is sufficiently universal and good to make possible their intelligent employment. The living standards of the small farmer, which are fundamental for the entire working class, had to be therefore quite high.

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But, even when the capitalists are ready to pay the corresponding wages, they have in America no prospects of receiving from the peasantry a sufficient number of workers. Since there is so much free land, it lures the rising generation to set up new farms, instead of falling into dependence in the cities. The rate of natural growth of the urban proletariat is, however, very low, and not uncommonly negative, in spite of its fertility – because its mortality is also very high. And, with high wages, it is not difficult to save enough money in order to set up a new farm, because the price of land is practically nominal. In that way, numerous elements from the urban proletariat again and again leave their class in order to turn to agriculture.

Under these circumstances, a mass proletariat, without which industrial capital cannot exist, could not have developed, and capital would have remained in the form of mercantile and money capital, had not a powerful factor come to its rescue: the massive immigration of foreign labourers. Though the Southern planters compulsorily imported numerous workers from Africa, free labourers came of their own will in huge numbers from Europe; at first especially from England, Ireland and Germany, later also from Italy, Austria, Russia. They were attracted by the perspective of setting up a farm on the free land, or by the high wages earned in the cities. The first increased the number of farmers, and therefore the market for industry and the clientele for the railways; the second, lacking the means or the agricultural knowledge, supplied industrial capital with the necessary labour force.

Thus, foreign immigrants have always played a large role in American agriculture, and they form an especially large percentage of the wage-workers. That is testified by the following data, which we have taken from the 1900 census.¹⁰

The following table shows the number of gainfully occupied persons, classified according to their occupation and nationality:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>American-born 1880</th>
<th>Foreign-born 1880</th>
<th>American-born 1890</th>
<th>Foreign-born 1890</th>
<th>American-born 1900</th>
<th>Foreign-born 1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>6,886,417</td>
<td>827,458</td>
<td>8,008,329</td>
<td>1,140,119</td>
<td>9,289,044</td>
<td>1,092,721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professions</td>
<td>530,026</td>
<td>73,176</td>
<td>828,956</td>
<td>115,368</td>
<td>1,113,403</td>
<td>145,135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁰ Hunt 1904.
The percentage of American- and foreign-born gainfully occupied persons in each sector of the economy was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>1,430,351</td>
<td>441,152</td>
<td>2,601,806</td>
<td>724,316</td>
<td>3,834,497</td>
<td>932,467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servants</td>
<td>2,474,849</td>
<td>943,944</td>
<td>2,820,962</td>
<td>1,399,850</td>
<td>4,081,220</td>
<td>1,499,437</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>2,575,809</td>
<td>1,208,917</td>
<td>3,820,255</td>
<td>1,858,213</td>
<td>4,903,670</td>
<td>2,181,639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13,897,452</td>
<td>3,494,647</td>
<td>18,080,308</td>
<td>5,237,866</td>
<td>23,221,834</td>
<td>5,851,399</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of 29 million gainfully employed persons in 1900, 6 million, i.e. one fifth, were foreign-born. The percentage of foreign-born was lowest in agriculture (10.5 per cent), and highest in industry (almost 31 per cent). The percentage of foreign-born gainfully employed persons increased from 1880 to 1890 and decreased from 1890 to 1900, so that it reached again the level of 1880.

But these figures do not sufficiently show the small share of the Anglo-Americans in the industrial proletariat of the United States, because they do not specify the number of blacks and first-generation white Americans. When these data are taken into account – which, unfortunately, is possible only for 1900, because figures for the earlier decades are not available in the census report – the following picture appears:
The percentage of each category of descent in the different occupations was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Whites of American Parentage</th>
<th>First-Generation White Americans</th>
<th>Foreign-born Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Indians</th>
<th>Chinese and Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>6,004,039</td>
<td>1,100,608</td>
<td>1,074,211</td>
<td>2,143,154</td>
<td>42,460</td>
<td>17,293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professions</td>
<td>806,288</td>
<td>259,434</td>
<td>143,896</td>
<td>47,219</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>2,400,018</td>
<td>1,225,351</td>
<td>915,151</td>
<td>208,989</td>
<td>1,532</td>
<td>15,923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servants</td>
<td>1,841,853</td>
<td>913,645</td>
<td>1,435,407</td>
<td>1,317,859</td>
<td>11,965</td>
<td>59,928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>2,823,131</td>
<td>1,801,886</td>
<td>2,168,153</td>
<td>275,116</td>
<td>6,031</td>
<td>10,992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13,875,329</td>
<td>5,300,924</td>
<td>5,736,818</td>
<td>3,992,337</td>
<td>62,934</td>
<td>104,891</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the gainfully employed white persons of American parentage, which, for the sake of brevity, we will call Anglo-Americans, constitute no more than one half of the total number of gainfully employed persons, a third of those employed in domestic and personal service, and only two-fifths of the industrial workers. If we consider only the gainfully employed males, we find the Anglo-Americans most strongly represented in the following occupations: farmers (63.2%), lawyers (75.6%), physicians (74.1%), teachers (71.5%), bankers (64.9%), commercial travellers (64.4%), journalists (67.4%), and engineers (66.4%). In industry, they are most numerous among carpenters and joiners (54.9%).

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11 Less than 0.1 per cent.
On the other hand, the foreign-born whites – not including the first-generation white Americans – working in industry are most strongly represented in among the bakers (56.4 per cent), an occupation in which the Anglo-Americans represent only 20.4 per cent. Besides, they are especially numerous among the dyers (53.0%, the Anglo-Americans only 20.6%), the cabinetmakers (56.5%, as against 24.9% for the Anglo-Americans), the hatters (50.4%, against 26.4%), the miners (43.7%, against 32.3%), and finally their numbers are especially high among the brewers (71.9% against 6.4%) and textile workers (75.8% against only 8.7% for the Anglo-Americans).

The blacks predominate in the hardest branches of female labour. They supply 76.8% of the female agricultural labourers (509,687), 65.1% of the washerwomen (218,227), and finally 26.9% of the maidservants (345,373).

These figures show clearly that whites of American parentage are only weakly represented in the industrial proletariat. In many important branches of industry, they constitute only a quarter, and sometimes as little as a fifth or a tenth, of the gainfully employed persons.

Especially small is the number of Anglo-Americans in New York. Out of 1,102,471 gainfully employed males, only 195,205 are whites of American parentage; out of 419,594 industrial workers, only 52,827; out of 56,095 textile workers, only 580. That is why New York is considered there as a European suburb.

The workers within the groups enumerated above, however, are by no means a homogeneous mass. The immigrants, above all, present a most variegated picture. The largest groups among them are the Germans (29.5 per cent), the Irish (21.7 per cent) and the English (9.3 per cent).

The immigrants of each nationality are distributed among the different occupations in very different proportions. Some of them prefer agriculture. Among the male immigrants, 35.4% of the Czechs, 39.6% of the Swiss, 44.4% of the Danes, and 54.6% of the Norwegians work in agriculture. On the other hand, industry occupies 40.0% of the English, 41.2% of the Scots, 44.5% of the Polish, 45.8% of the Russians (mostly Jews), 49.4% of the French Canadians, 52.4% of the Austrians (the denomination the census compilers give to the mostly Bohemian immigration); finally, 59.7% of the Hungarians – most of them miners. A high proportion of Russian immigrants (30.6%) work in commerce, while an even higher proportion of Italians (41.2%) are domestic servants. Most Germans are distributed almost equally between agriculture (28.3%) and industry (34.7%).
Austrian Social Democracy has experienced many difficulties as a result of the multiplicity of nations from which the proletariat of the land is recruited. But these nations are not strangers, they have developed under the same government, the same laws, sometimes even the same cultural traditions – so that, for instance, a Bohemian is not distinguished from a Czech by anything but his language. In America, on the other hand, the immigrants are so different from one another as well as from the local population in their race, religion, and cultural peculiarities, that they are barely able to understand each other, even when they speak the same language. Nowhere is more difficult to unite the masses in a centralised movement.

While, in Russia, a very large portion of the capital comes from foreign lands, making the population weaker, and the proletariat stronger than they should be according to the degree of industrial development of the country; in America, a very considerable section of the industrial proletariat comes from abroad, indeed from the four corners of the world, whereas its capital is totally indigenous and almost completely confined to the circle of interests of industrial capital. Here, capital is stronger and the proletariat weaker than they should be according to the degree of industrial development of the country.

VII. The lack of revolutionary romanticism in America

The different extent to which capital and proletariat come from abroad is one of the most important reasons for the relative weakness of the American and the relative strength of the Russian proletariat, but not the only one. An additional reason is the greater degree to which the Russian worker is filled with what some of our comrades now like to call, contemptuously, ‘revolutionary romanticism’; while the mass of the American workers still let themselves be led by what these gentlemen call ‘healthy Realpolitik’, which deals only with the nearest and most tangible things – something which fills them with admiration.

These different conceptions did not originate in the different racial character, but in the different ideological development of both nations.

The Russian worker developed in a state which united the barbarism of Asiatic despotism with the means of coercion developed by modern absolutism in the eighteenth century: it is within this framework that the capitalist mode
of production developed in Russia. As soon as the proletariat began to move, it immediately came across almost insuperable obstacles in every direction, experienced in the most painful way the insanity of the political situation, learned to hate it, and felt compelled to fight against it. It was impossible to attempt to reform this situation; the only possible course was a complete revolution of the established order. Thus, the Russian worker developed as an instinctive revolutionary, who enthusiastically adopted conscious revolutionary thought because it only stated in a clearer and more precise way what he had already obscurely felt and suspected. And he found a broad stratum of intellectuals which, like him, suffered under the existing conditions; like him, were mostly condemned to live a wretched existence; like him, could only exist in a constant struggle against the existing order of things; and, like him, could only hope for deliverance through complete revolution. They brought to the workers the theoretical clarity and solidity of their revolutionary élan. Nothing, however, is more suitable to the spiritual development of man than revolutionary thought, because nothing can give him a more lofty purpose. The revolutionary thinker always has the totality of state and society in view; he is not blind to the little details of everyday life, but he does not lose himself completely in them; he sees them only as part of a greater whole, and assigns them to their proper place; he inquires above all into the way these particulars affect him and how he can exert an influence on them; he learns to appreciate them correctly and keeps himself free from any illusion regarding their possible effects.

Because his aims are so vast, he learns to consider events in terms of the historical periods, in which they can only be achieved; he does not let himself be discouraged by defeats, nor blinded by partial successes. Because he examines every single aspect in connection with the whole, he does not let himself be confused with panaceas, which promise to cure the whole state, the entire society from all its wrongs, quickly and painlessly, simply by changing a single phenomenon. Finally, because he always has the whole of society in view, he recognises more clearly the great lines of demarcation that separate the different classes, in spite of all the points of contact between them; he understands the significance and tasks of the struggles of his class more clearly, and is able to give them greater resolution and unity of purpose.

The revolutionary world-view thus confers on the proletariat greater strength
and continuity of development; revolutionary ‘romanticism’ is of the greatest practical utility for the workers. It is above all thanks to it that the unorganised and uncultured Russian industrial workers, devoid of political and legal rights, are able, in a predominantly peasant country, to keep in check the absolutist régime before which all the possessing classes, not only of Russia, but of Europe, humbled themselves with servility.

Things are different in America. If Russia is the most unfree, America is the freest country of the capitalist world; freer even than England and Switzerland, where a medieval aristocracy sank strong roots, and, as late as the nineteenth century, equality of political rights and the right of association had to be achieved through a fierce struggle. The Northern states, established by peasant and petty-bourgeois fugitives during the period of the religious wars which followed the Reformation, for a long time bore the burden of European traditions, but eventually developed, in correspondence with their economic conditions, state constitutions which granted greater freedom and equality. And the prevailing social relations, above all the existence of an inexhaustible reserve of land, which made this first and most important means of production available to all, and for a long time prevented the formation of a mass proletariat, made sure that this liberty and equality did not remain on paper only. The scarcity of educated persons opened the state administration, law, journalism, in short, all the most important domains of the intelligentsia, to every intellectually energetic citizen, even if he did not possess the necessary professional qualifications – something to which the popular system of education, which was universal and comparatively very good, also contributed. Under these conditions, an intellectual aristocracy could not develop, and even less a closed state bureaucracy, because the party momentarily in power, which changed frequently, usually disposed of the state posts. Every intelligent worker, no matter from which social stratum he came, could expect to step up to a higher social position, or at least to rise above the ranks of the exploited.

Thus, for a long time, all the conditions were lacking which could suggest to the exploited classes the necessity of a decisive transformation of the state institutions; even the exploited classes themselves, as a mass phenomenon, were missing. And the mentality arising from these conditions has continued to exist to the present day. It is true that, in the meantime, a strong proletariat and the strongest capitalist class in the world have appeared in the United States, but, in spite of that, to this day the mass of the people can be divided, rather than between capitalists and proletarians, between those who are already capitalists, and those who want to become such.
Of course, there is between both classes, even in America – in fact, especially in America – the deepest opposition of interests. But, during the whole course of his historical development, the American worker has not been, up till now, forced to inquire into and oppose the *totality* of the existing social order. He always turns against particular institutions which annoy him. Any analysis of the origin of these phenomena, or of their connection with the entire political and social organism, appears to him as an idle rumination. In his contempt for every sort of theory, our *practicos*\textsuperscript{12} would find true happiness.

The American intelligentsia strengthens this world-view of the workers. While, in Russia, the intelligentsia, because of its social position, has become the indispensable agency through which revolutionary consciousness is brought to the proletariat, which it resembles in so many aspects, in America, it represents the connecting link between the proletariat and the capitalist class. Many proletarians enter politics, journalism, and the legal professions, which, because of the conditions of the country, constitute vast sources of enrichment, ladders up which a man can escape from the ranks of the propertyless. The American intelligentsia is therefore dominated by the desire to get rich, filled with the most unscrupulous capitalism of the soul.

From this intelligentsia, the worker can receive no enlightenment about his interests or about the historical tasks of his class. The American intellectual knows nothing about these matters, and when he knows something, he takes pains to hide it carefully.

American social relations are therefore very unfavourable to the development of a resolute proletarian class-consciousness, as well as to the setting of great goals involving the transformation of the entire society.

The opposition of interests between capital and labour is not, to be sure, effaced; in fact, it is perhaps stronger today in America than in Europe, because the capitalists, unhindered by any petty-bourgeois or ideological traditions, pursue their interests much more ruthlessly, and the workers, thanks to the democratic traditions of the country, likewise offer a most determined and resolute resistance. But all these numerous conflicts turn mostly around some momentary demands, and, to the extent that these comprise any more far-reaching claim, it is generally an isolated one, through which the workers hope to defend themselves against some opponent, or correct some wrong in the state or in society, without transforming them radically.

\textsuperscript{12} *Praktiker*: a reference to the trade-union revisionists with whom Kautsky was engaged in a fierce controversy at that time.
The main point, however, is this: that even these somewhat far-reaching demands must be ‘practical’, i.e. attainable in the short term and within the framework of existing social relations – because the American, whether capitalist or proletarian, is a Reapolitiker, and moreover in the capitalist sense of the word. The practicos of the Middle Ages believed that they worked for eternity. They built their domes and castles, created their paintings and even produced their tools and materials, to last forever. In the same way, they established their urban and political organisations believing that they would last eternally. Capitalism, affected as it is by continual revolutions; capitalism, which, in order to create new surplus-value, permanently devalues all existing values, is only interested in the profit of the moment. Whatever does not produce an immediate profit, can be replaced next year by a new invention. In the same way, the Realpolitiker of capitalism are always aiming at momentary goals, and this mentality infects also the proletarian politician, whenever he has not freed himself from the bourgeois way of thinking and learned to think as a revolutionary, i.e. to have in view the vast and great future.

Thus, the American Realpolitiker of the proletariat always limit themselves to ‘practical’ demands. They easily become very enthusiastic about them; if, however, these demands are not attained quickly, they are just as easily given up.

This kind of particular demand always finds supporters among isolated bourgeois politicians, because the irreconcilable opposition between capitalists and workers becomes evident, not in the isolated momentary demands of the proletariat, but in its collective endeavour to expropriate the capitalist class. The isolated and momentary demands of the proletariat, such as the mitigation of unemployment, the limitation of the power of the trusts, protective legislation for the workers, and so on, will always find the support of many bourgeois politicians, even of those who are most decidedly hostile towards the revolutionary class struggle. Though the support of bourgeois elements may look like an increase in the power of the proletariat, and therefore be used as a proof of the merits of Realpolitik, that is by no means the case. An isolated demand not only fails to interest the whole proletariat and unite all its forces; it also usually secures for the bourgeois elements which support it a pernicious influence over the workers. These bourgeois elements are either impotent ideologists without influence, who awake false illusions among the proletarians, and diminish the strength of their struggles without achieving any real success; or mere demagogues, who want to obtain the support of the proletariat through promises, in order to exploit its strength in their own interest.
Thus, we see that the popular reform movements in the United States are only created around particular demands, often of the most fraudulent nature, which, for instance, promise to liberate the oppressed classes by issuing paper- or silver-money (the ‘cheap money’ movement), or by reforming the fiscal system (the ‘single tax’ movement of Henry George). These movements arise very quickly and collapse even more rapidly, and have practically no other effect than to serve as springboards for quacks and swindlers.

It is precisely because all ‘revolutionary romanticism’ was lacking, because the most empty Realpolitik prevailed, that the policy of the working masses in the United States has, until now, been so inconsistent in its intensity and direction, and that they have left themselves, more than anywhere else in the world, be duped by demagogues and clowns.

VIII. Sombart on the American workers

A. The alcohol consumption of German and American workers

We began with a sentence from Sombart’s studies on the American proletariat, in which the Breslau professor asked why socialism has until now sunk roots in America only with great difficulty. In these studies we find recorded a series of remarkable facts. True, Sombart’s analysis offers practically nothing new, no significant point of view that had not been previously developed in the socialist press; but it contains a series of admissions that deserve to be retained, coming as they do from a duly appointed professor.

Certainly, one cannot accept his statements or even his statistics uncritically. He underestimates, in my opinion, the extent of the outlays for alcohol consumption by the American workers vis-à-vis the German workers.

He estimates that, after the American worker satisfies his requirements of housing, food, and clothing, he is still left with a surplus, which is nearer to a fifth than to a quarter of his wages, while the German worker ‘is very likely to have over a quarter (close to three-tenths) left over for “sundries”.’

What does the German worker do with the surplus that remains after his ‘necessary’ expenditure has been laid out – a surplus that is (relatively) so much greater than what remains to the American worker? Does he spend more on education? Or on amusements? On clubs? On taxes? On the doctor?

\[13\] Sombart 1976, p. 102.
No, not any of these. What he ‘saves’ after his expenditure on housing, clothing and food is squandered on drink. The entire difference – and more – between the ‘free’ income of the American worker and that of the German one is absorbed by expenditure on alcoholic drinks!

The fact that the American worker is apparently less given to alcohol than his German colleague has often been alluded to in recent years. I am in a position to confirm the correctness of this observation with statistics. Exactly half of the 2,567 American working-class families that were specially examined were total abstainers. Altogether only 50.72 percent had any expenditure on alcoholic drinks. Even among those who indulged in the consumption of alcohol, expenditure for ‘intoxicating liquors’ – the technical term for alcoholic drinks in the statistics – fluctuated within modest limits. These families spent a yearly average of $24.53 (103.03M). (The native-born ones lay out an average expenditure of $22.28 (93.58M) and the foreign-born ones an average of $27.39 (115.04M); the maximum was reached by the Scots with $33.63 (141.25M) – and by the Germans with $33.50 (140.70M).) The amount of $24.53 is 3.19 per cent of total expenditure. If, however, one calculates the expenditure on alcoholic drinks made by those families that drank as a fraction of the total expenditure of all families, there results an average budgetary debit due to this item of $12.44 (52.25M), or 1.62 per cent.¹⁴

By contrast, working-class families in Berlin spend yearly 117 marks on beer and brandy, in Karlsruhe 214 marks on alcoholic beverages, and in Nuremberg 143 marks.¹⁵

So far, we have followed Sombart’s argumentation, which is far from being conclusive. Certainly, I cannot affirm that the Germans – of all classes, professors and merchants and officers of the reserve as well as workers – are enemies of a good drop of wine. According to all appearances, they generally enjoy it more than the Americans. Sombart’s data, however, are by no means a ‘statistical confirmation’ of this hypothesis. To be sure, one finds them in a publication of the English Board of Trade, of which the Reichsarbeitsblatt of January 1906 offers an abstract. According to this report, the average expenses per capita amount to:

¹⁵ [Kautsky took these data from Sombart 1976, pp. 103–4.]
According to these statistics, alcohol consumption in the United States is lower than in Germany, but growing rapidly, while among us it has not changed appreciably. And the real American figures are apparently much higher, due to what Bar, in his work on drunkenness, described as ‘the colossal extent of smuggling, secret manufacture, and cheating’.

Moreover, the issue raised by Sombart cannot be settled by determining whether the German or the American worker spend more money on alcohol, because alcohol has not the same price here and there; in America, it is considerably more expensive than in Germany.

The household budgets of the workers are, as a rule, not a reliable source, because the housewife does not have the time and the means to carry out regular bookkeeping. What kind of statistical demonstration can offer a comparison of data taken, on the one hand, from three individual German cities, and, on the other hand, from a territory as diverse as Europe!

How different must be the figures of the household budgets in question, when we take into consideration, instead of the entire country, some individual states of the Union! An American survey covering 2,567 families gives an average expenditure of $24.53 on alcoholic drinks, but, in North Carolina, the figure was only $2.56, while, in the District of Columbia, it was $131.17! Sombart would have a difficult time finding in Germany a city able to compete

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16 The total quantity of alcohol contained in the wine, beer and brandy.
17 From 1890 to 1902.
with that famous district in its love of beer and brandy. More than 500 marks per capita on alcohol!

In general, one can say that the outlays on alcohol are much lower in the Southern than in the Northern states of the Union. According to the above-mentioned survey, the figures per working family were $14.09 in the South-Central states and $30.38 in the Northern states. The Northern states are, however, those that are closer to German conditions.

Besides, one must regard these entries in the American household budgets with suspicion. In America, there has been a decades-long bitter struggle against alcoholism. This struggle, however, has not been conducted in the only way it can be successful – on the one hand, through scientific enlightenment given by doctors, on the other hand, by inspiring the proletariat with a higher ideal of life, such as socialism offers – but through clerical quackery and the use of police repression by the authorities and employers.

In a whole series of states, the harshest police regulations are promulgated for the reduction of alcohol consumption, which is moreover often forbidden by employers. The Washington Commissioner of Labor undertook in 1897 a survey about the alcohol question, among other things asking a series of employers if they gave instructions to their workers about alcohol consumption. More than half of those surveyed responded in the affirmative (3,527 against 3,265). And, of those 3,527, more than half, 1,980, strictly forbade their workers to drink, not only during their working hours, but also during their free time. They also admitted having made inquiries as to whether people were teetotal or not.\(^18\)

Alcohol consumption has not thereby diminished. According to the above-mentioned study, it amounts to (in gallons):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Brandy</th>
<th>Wine</th>
<th>Beer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>5.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>8.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>13.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>15.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{18}\) Koren 1899, p. 72.
These data show that the already mentioned tendency towards increasing alcohol consumption has continued during the last few years.

The consumption of brandy has been diminishing for a long time (until 1895, when it began to grow again), but the consumption of beer has been growing constantly and enormously.

Police repression has only contributed to increase smuggling, cheating, and dissimulation. All these factors not only make American statistics on alcohol consumption inaccurate; they make the figures of the household budgets, which are subject to no control, completely unreliable as far as alcohol consumption is concerned. Even if we admit that the 50 per cent of the 2,567 families which admit being ‘drinkers’, have given an accurate account of their consumption of alcohol, it is very doubtful whether the other 50 per cent, which deny any consumption of alcohol, have all told the truth. Probably, they were dissimulating, as they feign being tee-total before their employers and the police, in order to avoid punishment.

Nobody had until now remarked that German workers in America drink less than in their fatherland. Yet, according to the famous statistics on the 2,567 families, 32 per cent of the 220 families of German origin denied having expended a cent in alcohol. A third of the German workers in America are abstemious! Who would have believed that we could go so far!

Let us consider still another figure, in order to illustrate the reliability of Sombart’s ‘statistical confirmation’. He asserts that, on average, the budget of each one of the 2,567 families examined included only $12.44 for alcohol. On the other hand, the already-quoted study *The Economic Aspects of the Liquor Problem* estimates the revenues of the United States (including the federal government, states, counties and urban communities) from the taxation of the importation, production and sale of alcohol, at more than $183 millions for the year 1896 – i.e. more than 700 million marks. That amounts, for a population of 70 million, to $2.6 per capita, or $13 for each family of five members, in *taxes* on alcohol consumption. Sombart, on the other hand, estimates, on the basis of his data on household budgets, an average expenditure of less than $12.44 per family on ‘intoxicating drinks’ – which means that the average family *expenditure* on alcohol is lower than the *taxes* they pay on alcoholic drinks according to the tax returns, which are always downwardly biased.
B. Proletarian ministerialism

Sombart acquaints us with many other peculiarities of the American worker better than with their abstinence, and he often offers excellent judgments about them.

He raises, for instance, the question: What benefits accrue to the proletariat when its struggles and growing might result in persuading the ruling parties to offer government posts to some of its leaders? It is well-known that when Millerand\(^\text{19}\) entered the bourgeois government of Waldeck-Rousseau, our revisionists were enraptured beyond measure and declared that that was the only way the proletariat could come to power – the striving to conquer the whole political power being sterile and foolish ‘revolutionary romanticism’. The experience with the Millerand experiment has somewhat cooled down our revisionist statesmen, and when John Burns recently got a ministerial post, it was received with an embarrassed silence, until the *enfant terrible* of German revisionism declared his enthusiasm for this triumph of the British proletariat.\(^\text{20}\) The Prussian professor knows better than the Social-Democratic member of the Reichstag how to ascertain the worth of this piecemeal method of conquering power – at least for America.

Sombart says of ‘the case of the leading trade-unionists, who are the workers’ leaders and to whom a richer reward is held out if they swear loyalty to the ruling party’:

They will be given a well-paid job, perhaps as a factory inspector or even as an Under-Secretary of State, depending on the significance attached to the person to be provided for. The practice of rendering influential workers’ leaders harmless by bestowing on them a lucrative post is a thoroughly established one, and for years it has been used with the greatest success by the ruling parties. We can follow this *castration process* among a whole series

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\(^{19}\) [Alexandre Millerand (1859–1943). A socialist member of the French Chamber of Deputies since 1885 and leader of the socialist Left until 1896, Millerand joined in 1899 the bourgeois cabinet of René Waldeck-Rousseau as minister of commerce. Millerand later filled a series of governmental posts in bourgeois governments and was elected president of the French Republic from 1920 to 1924.]

\(^{20}\) [John Elliot Burns (1858–1943). A labour leader of working-class origin, Burns was originally a member of the Social Democratic Federation and played a distinguished part in the organisation of mass strikes, which led to his arrest in 1888. In 1892, he was elected chairman of the Trades Union Congress and a socialist member of the House of Commons. On 10 December 1905, Burns followed Millerand’s example and entered Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman’s Liberal Cabinet as president of the Local Government Board.]
of the best-known leaders. At the moment the President of the American Federation of Labor, whose equivalent in Germany would be Karl Legien, is said to have been selected to succeed Carroll D. Wright as Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor, while John Mitchell, the victorious leader of the miners and so roughly equivalent to Hermann Sachse or Otto Hue in Germany, is supposed to be receiving a post as Under-Secretary of State in Washington.

It has been ascertained that in Massachusetts thirteen workers’ leaders have obtained political positions in this way within the space of a few years, while in Chicago thirty have done so...

However, when influential leaders betray a really oppositional workers’ movement in this way every time they have achieved power and esteem among their fellows, this means a direct gain for the major party not only in so far as the person of the leader and the group of workers who trusted him are concerned. In a far wider sense capitalism is strengthened indirectly, because a possible independent workers’ party experiences a damaging loss when its leader is lured away by the bait of office. In other words, on every occasion the major parties snatch the officers of the Socialist party organisations from under the noses of the latter while they are still being formed.  

One would assume that this is clearly grasped by anyone who has understood, that there is a fundamental difference between Social Democracy and the ‘large’ – that is to say, in America, the bourgeois – parties. Only those who have forgotten the fundamental difference between Social Democracy and liberalism can be of the opinion that a trade-union leader, or any other leader of the proletariat, can represent its interests from a post which he owes to the liberals.

C. The democratisation of capital

A second illusion of socialist revisionism is that the workers can become partners of the capitalists through the acquisition of shares, and that this represents a democratisation of capital. Sombart knows very well how this issue must be regarded.

The capitalists seek to buy off the worker by granting him a proportion of their profits. The method of doing this is by offering stock on advantageous

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terms. In certain circumstances the capitalists thereby kill two birds with one stone. Firstly, they draw the worker into the hurly-burly of running the business and arouse in him the base instincts both of acquisitiveness and of morbid excitement in speculation, thus binding him into the system of production that they champion. Secondly, however, they dispose of their inferior stock, averting an impending fall in prices and perhaps at the same time influencing the stock market momentarily in such a way as to secure extra pickings for themselves.\(^\text{22}\)

We wish every Social Democrat could see through the gross fraud of the ‘democratisation of capital’ as clearly as the liberal professor does. The example by means of which Sombart illustrates this ‘democratisation’ is characteristic:

This system has been used on a large scale by the Steel Trust. In 1903 the company first spent $2,000,000 of its profits from the previous year in buying up 25,000 of its preference shares. These were offered to the 168,000 employees at a rate of $82.50 each, payable within three years.

In order that the workers should be induced to hang on to their stock, an extra dividend of $5.00 annually per share was promised in the event that the stock remained for more than five years in the possession of the person who first acquired it. The offer met with general approval and 48,983 shares were acquired by employees of the company. Shortly after this there followed a fall in prices – although the purpose behind this piece of charity had been to retard or avoid just such a fall. The U.S. Steel Corporation’s preference shares fell to $50.00 each. The company then produced a new trick. In order to pacify the workers but at the same time to prevent a further decline in the price (which would have come about if the workers had disposed of their stock), the company pledged itself to buy back at a rate of $82.50 a share the stock being held by the workers, in case the latter should hold on to them until 1908! As early as December of the same year (1903) the Corporation made a new offer to the workers – under conditions similar to the first one – except that the price of the preference shares was fixed at $55.00 each. Again, 10,248 employees entered into the proposition and altogether they acquired 32,519 shares. Since meanwhile the shares had risen again to $82.00 each, the workers received a benefit from their purchase this time.\(^\text{23}\)

\(^{22}\) Sombart 1976, p. 113.

\(^{23}\) Sombart 1976, pp. 113–14.
Sombart indicates that, ‘at least temporarily’, the result of such a policy is that ‘the worker becomes steeped in the capitalist mentality’.  

D. Capitalist trade-union policy

A third illusion of revisionism is the efficacy of the trade alliances, unions of workers’ organisations and employers’ organisations formed with the purpose of keeping up prices, in which both sides pledge mutual support for the organisation. Just as in the possession of shares by the workers and the granting of state posts to workers’ leaders, our revisionists see in the trade alliances a way of gradually ‘undermining’ capitalism, of imperceptibly – true, rather too imperceptibly – turning it into socialism, without any of those detestable catastrophes. Sombart assesses these trade alliances very well. He says:

This politics of business (of the guild-like-minded trade unions) finds its purest expression in the combinations of the monopolistic trade union and the monopolistic employer in the so-called ‘Alliances,’ which are organisations aimed at the common exploitation of the public through the union of the employers and workers of a particular sector of the economy. One can describe these sorts of trade unions as capitalist and contrast them with the Socialist trade unions; the former are carved from the same wood as capitalism itself and, in both their inclinations and their effects, they are directed to the maintenance and strengthening of the capitalist economic system, rather than to its overthrow. The politics of the Socialist trade unions are also tailored to success in the present, but at the same time they do not lose sight of the proletarian class-movement against capitalism.

As a rule, Sombart offers many sensible opinions about the trade-union movement. Many trade-union leaders seem to believe that the aim of the working-class movement is not the abolition of private property in the means of production, but the ‘constitutional factory’. Many hold this to be a transitional stage towards socialism, and believe that they have almost reached it, when the employer abandons his dictatorial attitude and deals with the workers as equals; regarding them, not as servants, but as sellers of commodities, even if that commodity is nothing but their labour-power.

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That the workers should strive to be treated by their employers, not as slaves having no will of their own, but as equals, is obvious. But they must not be deceived into thinking that the higher, more civilised form of intercourse with them changes the content of their exploitation in any significant way. Sombart perceived this fact very well:

This stress on ‘equality of rights,’ to which social and public life in the United States is geared, is even to be found inside capitalist businesses. Even here the employer does not confront the worker as the Lord who demands obedience, which was and is the usual case in old Europe with its feudal traditions. From the beginning a purely business standpoint became the prevailing rule in the bargaining of wage agreements. There was no question of the worker having first to engage in long conflict with the employer for the ‘equality’ between them to be formally recognised. The American woman was treated with great tenderness because she was scarce; similarly, the employer took the trouble to behave towards the labour force, which was not originally available in the quantity he wanted, in a polite and accommodating manner that found strong support in the democratic atmosphere of the country. Today even English workers are still astonished at the respectful tone that employers and foremen in the United States adopt towards the worker, and they are astonished at the license given to the American worker even in his workplace; he is ‘freed from what one may call vexatious supervision.’ They are surprised that he can take a day or two off, that he can go out to smoke a cigar – indeed, that he smokes while working – and that there is even an automatic cigar-vending machine for his use in the factory. It is also characteristic of the American manufacturers that they fail to put into effect even the simplest protective measures in their plants and that they are not in the least bit concerned that the set-up of the place of work be good when objectively assessed. (Quite frequently places of work are overcrowded and have similar deficiencies.) On the other hand, they are most eager to provide anything that could be perceived subjectively by the worker as an amenity; in other words, they take care of ‘comfort’: bathtubs, showers, lockers, temperature control in the workrooms, which are cooled by fans in the summer and are preheated in the winter . . .

These are certainly all trivialities, but the saying that ‘small gifts preserve friendship’ is applicable even here. Later I shall try to show that – when the matter is considered objectively – the worker in the United States is
more exploited by capitalism than in any other country in the world, that in no other country is he so lacerated in the harness of capitalism or has to work himself so quickly to death as in America. However, this is irrelevant if one is engaged in explaining what working-class sentiments consist of. To account for their character all that is important is what individuals perceive as being pleasure or pain and what they assess as being valuable or worthless. It is one of the most brilliant feats of diplomatic artifice that the American employer (in just the same manner as the business-oriented politician) has realised how to keep the worker in a good mood despite all actual exploitation, and that the latter is a long way from achieving consciousness of his real position.26

Some people could object that, if equality of rights and political freedom have such a negative effect on the class consciousness and the class struggle of the American proletariat, while the lack of such conditions in Europe (especially in Eastern Europe) heightens the proletarian class struggle, it is absurd to demand equality of rights and political freedom, and make so many sacrifices on their behalf. Not at all. Without equality of rights and political freedom, the proletariat cannot develop its whole strength; the worker needs them as he needs air and light, they are vital elements for him. But their effects are different where the proletariat finds them from the beginning as self-evident rights, about whom he needs not worry, than where he has to fight in order to gain them. Just as the striving after the truth is much more valuable than the effortless possession of a truth discovered by others, so the struggle for freedom is very much superior to the passive possession of a freedom that others have won before.

The American workers owe to the possession of these rights won by their fathers the fact that, up till now, they have been as a class weaker than the European workers, though only because each one of them was stronger as a citizen. And they possessed not only political freedom, not only social equality of rights; no, also the most important means of production, the land, had not become the monopoly of one class, but stood at everyone’s disposal. Why become a socialist, why struggle for a distant future, if a considerable part of the socialist aims had become a reality in America, at least until quite recently?

26 Sombart 1976, pp. 111–12.
All the causes that have till now prevented the American worker from becoming as conscious of his class opposition to capital and of his class solidarity with his fellow workers as the European proletarian, are now in decline. Sombart therefore closes his ‘Studies in the Historical Development of the North American Proletariat’ with the promise that he will show in a forthcoming book how ‘all the factors that till now have prevented the development of Socialism in the United States are about to disappear or to be converted into their opposite, with the result that in the next generation Socialism in America will very probably experience the greatest possible expansion of its appeal.’

I do not know whether our – for contemporary Germany – liberal professor, has the intention of acknowledging socialism for America and for future generations, and whether he will also reject for Germany the revisionist illusions, whose futility in America he has discerned so well. In any case, we will look forward to that book with expectation. But we do not need to wait for it in order to recognise that the preconditions for socialism are developing rapidly in America, and that we can assist to their blossoming, not only in future generations, but perhaps within a few years.

The last census has made public some figures, which we will consider in our next section.

IX. The pauperisation of the American worker

A. The decline of petty-bourgeois agriculture

Since the revisionists attempt either to refute or to ‘develop’ Marxist theory, i.e. to break its backbone in order to make it submissive, the demand for the conquest of power by the proletariat and the theory of the constant intensification of class contradictions make them especially angry. In order to refute them, they give them an absurd form, arguing that the demand for the conquest of political power results from a ‘speculation’ about ‘catastrophes’, which in turn is supposedly based on a special theory of catastrophes; and that the theory of the necessary sharpening of class contradictions derives from a theory of the pauperisation of the worker – as if Marx had harboured the absurd hope that the strength of the proletariat to remodel the social organism would arise from its increasing degeneration.

Sombart 1976, p. 119, emphasis in the original.
The Russian Revolution [of 1905] and, over the last few years, the especially strong sharpening of the class struggles in the whole of Europe have meanwhile condemned the criticism of the so-called ‘catastrophe theory’, if not to complete silence, at least to insignificance. But also economic development had, to a large extent, already reduced *ad absurdum* the criticism of ‘pauperisation theory’, i.e. the theory of the sharpening of class contradictions between capital and labour.

American conditions provide new materials on these issues, because there the development has been especially rapid in the last decades, rendering its tendencies clearly visible. They show that the Golden Age for the American worker within the capitalist mode of production lies, not *before*, but *behind* him; that his social position vis-à-vis capital – and that is the decisive thing – is continually worsening.

The main cause of the great privileges that the American worker possessed compared to the European worker was the fact that the decisive means of production, the land, was not the exclusive monopoly of a caste of landowners; that he had free access to it. The American worker is however losing this privilege more and more. Comrade Simons has already, in his article on the United States in *Die Neue Zeit*, 28 alluded to the remarkable fact that the agricultural population of the state of Iowa is decreasing. This indication can be complemented by a note that appeared in the German press a few weeks ago. It reads:

The journal *Science* offers some notable figures from the latest census of the United States. Especially remarkable have been the changes in the population of the state of Iowa. While it is generally supposed that everywhere in the United States an incessant demographic growth is taking place, that state has suffered in the last five years a diminution of 150,000 inhabitants. . . . Also in other parts of the United States population growth has at least slowed down considerably. In the state of Minnesota the population grew by more than a third in the decade from 1890 to 1899, i.e. almost 3.5 percent annually; while in the last five years the growth was less than 2.5 percent annually. Researchers have therefore concluded, that the agricultural population of the United States – even in the most fertile and, for agriculture, the most favourable region, the West – has at least ceased to grow due to city-ward

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migration or to other causes. The reason is, above all, to be found in the rapid growth in farmland prices. In Iowa, where cattle-breeding and dairy farming are pre-eminent, the preservation of the old family property is becoming more and more impossible, and agricultural activities are falling more and more into the hands of capitalists farmers. The traditional farmers must therefore either emigrate to neighbouring Canada or towards the South- or Northwest, where land is cheaper. The large state of Kansas had, according to the last census, slightly more than 1.5 million inhabitants, and it has grown since 1900 by an average of only 8,658 souls yearly. Of the 105 counties of the state, only 58 have registered a growth, the other 47 a diminution. Besides, it must be taken into consideration that the population of this region is very sparse in relation to its size, and that not special circumstances, such as bad harvests or other hostile events, have intervened.

These developments have not been completely unexpected. In relative terms, the agricultural population of the United States has been declining for a long time. In spite of the abundant free land available, the number of agriculturalists is not increasing as quickly as the number of people employed in other occupations. From 1880 to 1900, the number of gainfully employed people in agriculture grew indeed from 7,713,875 to 10,381,765, but it diminished as a percentage of the total number of gainfully employed persons, from 44.3 per cent in 1880 to 35.7 per cent in 1900. Only in the Far-Western states their number grew more quickly than the total number of gainfully employed persons (from 22 to 25 per cent); on the other hand, it is decreasing even in the Central states, the granary of the country: in the North-Central states from 48.6 to 36.5 per cent, and in the South-Central, from 70.2 to 63.4 per cent. Above all, it is decreasing in the North-Eastern states, where, already in 1880, they represented 19.8 per cent, and in 1890 only 12.5 per cent of the population.

Lowest of all is the percentage of agriculturalists in Massachusetts: 9.9 per cent in 1880, 5.5 per cent in 1900. Here, the agricultural population is already smaller than in England! That in a region which is larger than Württemberg, and no more densely populated!

But, in the Northern states, the reduction in the number of gainfully employed people in agriculture is not only relative, but also absolute. It amounts to:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>83,194</td>
<td>81,193</td>
<td>73,791</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>44,931</td>
<td>41,658</td>
<td>37,224</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>55,431</td>
<td>53,290</td>
<td>48,352</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>64,988</td>
<td>68,790</td>
<td>64,669</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>10,951</td>
<td>11,446</td>
<td>10,673</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>44,184</td>
<td>44,830</td>
<td>43,247</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>376,931</td>
<td>388,951</td>
<td>363,619</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>58,993</td>
<td>67,193</td>
<td>67,035</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>303,894</td>
<td>337,089</td>
<td>331,119</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,043,497</td>
<td>1,094,440</td>
<td>1,039,729</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since 1890, the agricultural population in all these states has decreased. In the first three, the absolute decrease began already in 1880. Excluding Massachusetts and Rhode Island, they are all very scarcely populated in comparison with Saxony, with 280 inhabitants, and even with Prussia, with 99 inhabitants per square kilometre.

But, even in two of the ‘wheat states’, a reduction of the agricultural population has taken place, while, in the others, the increase is minimal. In these states, the number of gainfully employed people in agriculture is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>404,365</td>
<td>399,909</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>334,127</td>
<td>332,840</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>173,218</td>
<td>182,338</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>260,194</td>
<td>264,628</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lately, it has also been reported of the state of Iowa, which belongs to the group of the North-Central states, that, since 1900, it has experienced a diminution of the agricultural population. From 1890 to 1900, it still exhibited a quite strong increase: from 328,386 to 363,472 agriculturalists.
Why this peculiar phenomenon in regions so scarcely populated? I intend to deal with this question in a more detailed way as soon as I have additional data at my disposition. For the time being, it is enough to say that this decline must be ascribed to the exhaustion of the soil. This does not mean that there is not enough land available in the United States, but that there is not enough fertile, uncultivated, and well-situated land available, able to supply abundant yields with the extensive and superficial agricultural methods employed till now. A new, more intensive sort of cultivation has to be introduced, but it requires money, capital, i.e. things unavailable to propertyless people. The poor farmers fall into debt, and either go bankrupt or have to bear such a burden of labour that it draws at least the more mobile members of the young generation away from agriculture and into industry or commerce. The migration from the countryside to the towns has begun also in America. That does not prove the decline of its agriculture but, on the contrary, its transition towards capitalist management. It will become a business carried on with capital and exploited by capitalists, and it will cease to be the escape valve through which the discontent and desperation of large layers of the American proletariat was diverted.

Moreover, the more this proletariat is concentrated into great cities and large industries, the more it will lose its capacity to turn to agriculture. In 1880, there were 286 cities with more than 8,000 inhabitants, in 1900, there were already 545; in 1880, these cities had 11,318,547 inhabitants (22.6 per cent of the total population), in 1900, they had already 24,992,199 (33.1 per cent). There were 45 cities with more than 40,000 inhabitants in 1880; twenty years later, there were 92.

B. The decline of wages

While the proletariat becomes less and less capable of turning to agriculture, which is entering into its capitalist stage, industry and commerce, which were already capitalistically managed, are increasingly entering the stage of private monopoly, of the trusts. We have already given some examples of this phenomenon in the previous section of this study; the facts, moreover, are so well known that we need not offer here a more detailed exposition of them. With the trust system, however, arises a capitalist feudalism that gives to a few families absolute dominion over the whole capitalist economy and oppresses more and more even the small capitalists, making completely hopeless any aspiration of the proletariat to enter the ranks of the bourgeoisie.
At the same time, these developments make the situation of the proletariat steadily worse.

That is clearly shown by an interesting work of the Washington Commissioner of Labor, which surely does not give an exaggeratedly negative view of the situation in its Bulletin of July 1905. It contains a detailed analysis of wages and working hours in industry from 1890 to 1904, as well as of average foodstuff prices in retail trade during that period. The results of this three-hundred-pages-long study are summarised in the following table, offering a series of relative numbers having 100 as a basis, which is an average of the corresponding figures from 1890 to 1899. The numbers over 100 therefore indicate a rise above the average, those under 100 a fall below it. The table shows the following development:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Workers</th>
<th>Hours of Work per week</th>
<th>Wages per Hour</th>
<th>Work-week per Worker</th>
<th>Retail Food-Stuff Prices</th>
<th>Purchasing Power of Wages&lt;sup&gt;29&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Of Weekly Wages Of Hourly Wages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>100.7</td>
<td>100.3</td>
<td>101.0</td>
<td>102.4</td>
<td>97.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>100.5</td>
<td>100.3</td>
<td>100.8</td>
<td>103.8</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>100.5</td>
<td>100.8</td>
<td>101.3</td>
<td>101.9</td>
<td>98.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>99.4</td>
<td>100.3</td>
<td>100.9</td>
<td>101.2</td>
<td>104.4</td>
<td>96.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>97.9</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>98.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>96.4</td>
<td>100.1</td>
<td>98.3</td>
<td>98.4</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>100.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>98.6</td>
<td>99.8</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>99.5</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>100.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>100.9</td>
<td>99.6</td>
<td>99.6</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>103.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>106.4</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>100.2</td>
<td>99.9</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>101.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>112.1</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>102.0</td>
<td>101.2</td>
<td>99.5</td>
<td>102.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>115.6</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>105.5</td>
<td>104.1</td>
<td>101.1</td>
<td>104.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>119.1</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>108.0</td>
<td>105.9</td>
<td>105.2</td>
<td>102.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>123.6</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>112.2</td>
<td>109.2</td>
<td>110.9</td>
<td>101.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>126.5</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>116.3</td>
<td>112.3</td>
<td>110.3</td>
<td>105.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>125.7</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>117.0</td>
<td>112.2</td>
<td>111.7</td>
<td>104.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>29</sup> Calculated according to the retail prices of foodstuffs.
This table reveals how little the amount of money-wages alone means for the situation of the worker. These wages apparently show a clear improvement in the position of the proletariat: the weekly wages, which in 1896 stood slightly below the decennial average, rose from 1896 to 1904 by 12 per cent (from 99.5 to 112.2). Unfortunately, however, during the same period, average foodstuffs prices grew more rapidly: about 16 per cent on average (from 95.5 to 111.7). From 1890 to 1896, the purchasing power of weekly wages was still rising, from 98.6 to 104.2. Since then, however, it has fallen to 100.4, thanks to the rise in prices caused by the trusts. And, during the two last years under consideration, from 1903 to 1904, we find even a fall in weekly wages, from 112.3 to 112.2, while during the same period the average relative prices of foodstuffs grew from 110.3 to 111.7.

Yet these tables do not offer a completely satisfactory description of actual conditions. They take into account only foodstuff prices, the outlays on which only constitute, on average, 42.5 per cent of the total expenses of a working family. The changes in prices of other necessaries of life, such as housing, were not examined. The prices of these items grow, at least in Europe, even

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30 In order to reach the relative average prices of foodstuffs in retail trade (Column 6), we have employed the already-mentioned household budgets of the 2,567 families, which include data from all over the country, in order to determine their average consumption of foodstuffs as well as their relative share in the household budget. These data, taken together with the average foodstuffs prices in retail trade for each year, have made possible to calculate how much on average a family had to spend on foodstuffs in each one of these fifteen years, and to what extent these expenditures have risen above or fallen below the average from 1890 to 1899. The absolute and relative figures of these expenditures for the average of the 2,567 families were as follows (the average expenditure from 1890 to 1899, $310.74, equals 100 in the third column):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average Expenditure</th>
<th>Relative Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>$318.20</td>
<td>102.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>$322.55</td>
<td>103.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>$316.55</td>
<td>101.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>$324.41</td>
<td>104.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>$309.81</td>
<td>99.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>$303.91</td>
<td>97.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>$296.76</td>
<td>95.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>$299.24</td>
<td>96.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>$306.70</td>
<td>98.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>$309.19</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>$314.16</td>
<td>101.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>$326.90</td>
<td>105.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>$344.01</td>
<td>110.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>$342.75</td>
<td>110.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>$347.10</td>
<td>111.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
more quickly than foodstuff prices. Is the situation different in America? Unfortunately, we were unable to find any comparable material on these issues.

Besides, we have been considering average figures for all occupations. The evolution of wages, however, is very dissimilar in different occupations. Next to a few privileged layers of workers, which obtain very considerable rises in their wages, there are many others whose rise in money wages falls below the average, and even others which show an absolute fall in money wages. There are detailed proofs of this only for the evolution of hourly wages, not for that of weekly wages. They changed in average, between 1890 and 1904, from 100.3 to 117.0. But if we look at the data for individual occupations (which we have chosen at random from a sixty-four-pages-long list), we find, for instance, that, in the building trade, the hourly wages of the structural iron workers have risen from 93.6 to 171.4, while those of the day labourers rose only from 102.7 to 114.3. In the wagon factories, the hourly wages of the cabinetmakers rose from 107.6 to 132.3, while those of the day labourers rose only from 99.7 to 106.3.

In the textile industry, the evolution of wages for male workers in some trades was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dyers</th>
<th>Frame Spinners</th>
<th>Weavers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>106.3</td>
<td>111.6</td>
<td>113.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>107.2</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>103.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>107.7</td>
<td>185.9</td>
<td>118.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>104.8</td>
<td>169.7</td>
<td>115.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The wages of dyers and weavers remained therefore fairly stable; those of the spinners experienced extreme changes, finally showing a strong increase. In 1904, there was a general fall in wages.

One more example from the gas trade:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Day Labourers</th>
<th>Pipe Fitters</th>
<th>Retort Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>98.7</td>
<td>102.3</td>
<td>98.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>102.4</td>
<td>97.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>99.1</td>
<td>103.0</td>
<td>100.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>101.9</td>
<td>101.9</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this trade, wages remained virtually constant at the same level; those of the pipe fitters, however, were lower in 1904 than in 1890.

Taking into account the fact that, because of the steep rise in the prices of the necessaries of life in general, the purchasing power of wages hardly grew from 1890 to 1904, and that from 1896 on it declined, while money wages per hour rose from 100 to 117, it is clear that the purchasing power of wages must have fallen in a whole series of occupations, which did not show any similar rise in money wages, and that, specially since 1896, a decided pauperisation, i.e. a considerable absolute worsening in the standard of living, must have taken place where money wages remained stable or declined.

C. Child and female labour

Clear evidence of the increasing deterioration in the situation of broad layers of the American population is provided by the increase in the number of child and female labourers.

The number of gainfully employed children in the ten- to fifteen-years-old age group grew from 1,118,356 in 1880 to 1,750,178 in 1900. It represented in 1880 16.8 per cent, and, in 1900, 18.2 per cent of all children in that age group.

In 1890, were counted the gainfully employed children between 10 and 14 years, not the age group from 10 to 15 as in 1880. In 1900, both groups were computed. The censuses show an enormous growth in the number of employed children in the ten- to fourteen-years-old age group during the last decade. The figures are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>603,013</td>
<td>1,197,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.6 per cent</td>
<td>14.8 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, the statisticians of the census try to prove that the data for 1890 are false, because the compilers then failed to take into account a large number of gainfully employed children. If that is true, it only proves that the shouts of joy with which our bourgeois and other optimists received the figures of the 1890 census were groundless. The statisticians of the census had then not the slightest doubt about the correctness of their data, and since these figures showed that, in 1890, only 8.6 per cent of all children in the ten- to fourteen-years-old age group were gainfully employed, as against 16.8 per cent for the ten- to fifteen-years-old age group in 1880, they joyfully reported a
diminution of child labour and a mitigation of capitalist exploitation. Nowadays, such claims are heard no more.

And what sort of hell the ‘gainful employment’ often means for the unlucky children, our readers have had the opportunity to learn from the articles of comrade Sorge on child and female labour in the United States.\(^{31}\)

Female labour is also growing alongside child labour – and not as a result of the striving of women for independence. In America, as a result of immigration, which brings in more men than women, the latter have always been a minority. In 1900, there were in the United States 39 million men and 37 million women. Like the wage-labourers, women have in the United States a scarcity value that places them in a higher position than in Europe. And, just as people employ in America the highest possible number of machines in order to render wage-labourers superfluous, they also try to organise their households so as to employ the smallest possible amount of labour-power. Women were in that way relieved from many household duties, but thanks to their privileged position and the usually good income of men, they did not need to spend their greater leisure time working outside their homes. American women were not emancipated through the independence which their occupations granted them. Nowhere is the woman more dame, nowhere is she more regarded as a luxury, than in the United States.

Sering, for instance, gives the following account of the women of the American farmers:

> In her dress and behaviour, the farm woman looks like a perfect lady,\(^ {32}\) and in no way differs from the urban ladies. The farmers’ daughters usually receive in college a higher education than the sons, which must pursue a money-making occupation earlier. It is very rare to find an American woman working at the fields, and in those cases one can almost always be sure, that the woman belongs to a family of immigrant farmers.\(^ {33}\)

With such views, the force of necessity must be especially strong before a woman decides to turn to wage-labour.

Even today, wage-labour is much less common among the women of the native white population than among the foreign-born whites and the blacks.

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31 Sorge 1904, pp. 716-23 and 757-65.
32 [In English in the original.]
33 Sering 1887, p. 180.
In general, 18.8 per cent of the gainfully employed persons in 1900 were women. But this percentage falls in the case of the native white population to 13 per cent, while it rises to 21.7 per cent among second-generation white Americans, to 19.1 per cent among immigrants, and to 40 per cent among coloured people.

Nevertheless, that 13 per cent already represents a considerable increase of female labour among the native whites, which, in 1890, constituted only 11 per cent of the gainfully employed persons.

Over the last decades the proportions between male and female labourers evolved in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>14,744,942</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>2,647,157</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>19,312,651</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>4,005,532</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>23,753,836</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>5,319,397</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Male labourers are visibly losing terrain.

D. Unemployment

Next to the evolution of the purchasing power of wages and of child and female labour, there is a third criterion to measure the increase or diminution in the social misery of the working class: unemployment. The last American census offers valuable data on this issue as well. It shows the number of people that were unemployed at least once during the course of the census year (from June 1, 1899, to May 31, 1900). The results yield the following picture, to which we have added the data for 1890:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>Percentage of GEP</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>Percentage of GEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of GEP</td>
<td>23,318,183</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>29,073,233</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of unemployed</td>
<td>3,523,730</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>6,468,964</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEP in agriculture</td>
<td>9,148,448</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>10,381,765</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed in agriculture</td>
<td>1,020,205</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>2,144,689</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEP in the liberal professions</td>
<td>944,333</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1,258,538</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thus, more than a fifth of the entire number of gainfully employed people—in industry, the liberal professions and domestic service, more than a quarter—were unemployed between 1899 and 1900. And unemployment is clearly growing. Of course, the statisticians of the census assert that the figures for 1890 are not accurate, that they are too low, because the counting was incomplete. But it is remarkable that, as in the case of child labour, they come to that conclusion about the figures for 1890, which where then accepted as correct without any objection, in 1900. They object to the figures for 1890 after they have been alarmed by the colossal increase in unemployment shown by the data of the 1900 census, if the figures for 1890 are correct.

But nobody affirms that the figures for 1900 are too high. The correction can therefore only prove that unemployment had been very high already in 1890. It is unreasonable to assume that the counting of 1890 was so incorrect, that it was mistaken by about 50 per cent. Had the percentage of unemployed been the same in 1890 as in 1900, their number must have then amounted to 5,200,000 — almost 1,700,000 more than the official number for 1890, which was around 3,500,000. The mistake cannot have been so great. Unemployment has, therefore, in any case, grown from 1890 to 1900, even if not in the enormous proportion shown by the census figures. And who can guarantee

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34 [GEP: Gainfully Employed Persons.]
that, in 1910, statisticians will not once again find out that the 1900 also failed to determine the whole number of unemployed?

That the counting of the unemployed in 1890 was not much more incorrect than that of 1900 is indicated by the fact that, in a considerable number of industries, the percentage of unemployed in 1890 was greater than in 1900:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Workers</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical Works</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpet Factories</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Goods</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knitted Garments</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woollens</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Textile Workers</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>18.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many branches of industry, the percentage of unemployed has remained virtually unchanged, for example, among the blacksmiths: 12.1 per cent in 1890, 13.7 per cent in 1900. But, in other branches, the growth of unemployment has been very considerable. For instance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Workers</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1900</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carpenters</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricklayers</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>55.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painters and Varnishers</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass Workers</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>59.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day Labourers</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Labourers</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoemakers</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet-Makers</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printers</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tin-Workers</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatters</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tailors</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth Manufacturers</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
But these figures, no matter how terrible, by no means reveal the whole extent of unemployment, because the census distinguishes only between occupations, but not between independent and wage-workers within each occupation. The percentages do not indicate how many wage-workers, but how many gainfully occupied persons are unemployed. Among independent self-employed workers, however, one cannot speak of unemployment. The percentages of unemployment among wage-workers are therefore much higher than the figures quoted above. We do not have data for the entire working class, but for a group of 25,440 families with 124,108 members, whose situation was investigated by the Washington Commissioner of Labor in 1901. The members of the sample were exclusively wage-workers from 33 states. The data show that, in a year, out of 24,402 families, not less than 12,154, that is to say almost half (49.81 per cent), had been unemployed for an average period of 9.43 weeks, i.e. more than two months! For 1,419 of them (11.7 per cent of the unemployed) the period of unemployment lasted twenty weeks and more, up to one year!

The immigrants were the group most badly hit. In the course of the year, their number of unemployed was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Percentage of Family Heads</th>
<th>Average Unemployment Period in Weeks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>48.09</td>
<td>9.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Countries</td>
<td>52.35</td>
<td>10.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Countries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>51.41</td>
<td>10.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>54.50</td>
<td>9.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria-Hungary</td>
<td>57.66</td>
<td>9.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>65.60</td>
<td>10.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>66.90</td>
<td>11.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The situation of the unlucky Russians was in every respect the worst. Two thirds of them were unemployed in the course of the year, each by an average period of almost three months!

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35 United States Bureau of Labor 1904.
To the extent that it is possible to draw comparisons from the census figures which we have gathered and whose evolution we have calculated in percentages, they indicate that, as regards the *unemployment period*, conditions have deteriorated since 1890 as much as they have deteriorated as regards the number of unemployed.

**Men**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 to 3 Months</th>
<th>4 to 6 Months</th>
<th>7 to 12 Months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>1,553,759</td>
<td>1,179,426</td>
<td>279,932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>2,593,136</td>
<td>2,069,546</td>
<td>564,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>66 %</td>
<td>76 %</td>
<td>101 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 to 3 Months</th>
<th>4 to 6 Months</th>
<th>7 to 12 Months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>265,106</td>
<td>188,992</td>
<td>56,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>584,617</td>
<td>485,379</td>
<td>171,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase</td>
<td>120 %</td>
<td>156 %</td>
<td>203 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can see that, for both male and female unemployed, the number of those unemployed for a short period of time has proportionately diminished, while the number of those unemployed for longer periods has proportionately increased. Among men, the cases of unemployment from 1 to 3 months have increased by ‘only’ 66 per cent – while, at the same time, the population increased by 21 percent and the number of gainfully employed people by about 24 per cent! But the number of those who remained unemployed for a period of between 4 and 6 months grew between 1890 and 1900 by about 76 per cent, while the number of those that were unable to find a job for more than half a year *doubled*.

Female unemployment grew even more quickly, by about 120 per cent for the milder cases and 156 per cent for the more difficult ones, while among the worst cases it *tripled*.

No wonder that the compilers of the 1900 census are satisfied with hinting at the inaccuracy of the figures of 1890, which they hide in shame instead of confronting them with the data for 1900 – thus leaving to the reader the task of analysing the accuracy of their criticism.
We gladly concede that the data are defective. But, to the extent that they show anything, they reveal an unprecedented growth and intensification of unemployment precisely in 1900, which was a year of prosperity in America. And one has only to look at the evidence provided by additional sources on American labour conditions to realise that the figures quoted above, no matter how inexact they might be in their details, offer on the whole an accurate picture of the real tendencies of development.

Sombart, for instance, reports that Robert Hunter’s book *Poverty* (1904) ‘throws light into the depths of the misery of America’s large cities’.  

The author estimates that the number of people in the United States living below the poverty line, that is, those who are underfed, underclothed or badly housed, totals in times of average prosperity ten million, of whom four million are public paupers. In 1897 over two million people in New York may have received relief. In times of economic expansion, as in 1903, 14 per cent of the population of that city lives in distress, and in bad times, as in 1897, the figure is 20 per cent. From this it may therefore be estimated that, if one also counts the deserving poor, the number living in poverty in New York and in other large cities would seldom – so the author thinks – fall below 25 per cent. In Manhattan, the main part of New York, in the notably prosperous year of 1903, 60,463 families (14 per cent of the total) were evicted from their homes. One in every ten persons who die in New York is buried at public expense in Potter’s Field.

These figures show the same tendency as the census data on unemployment.

Taken together with the data on unemployment, however, the above-quoted data showing a decline in the purchasing power of wages since 1896 reveal an even worse picture. The statistics on wages give the weekly income of the workers, calculated in hourly wages. The decisive question for the well-being of the worker, however, is not his weekly, but his yearly income, and that will evidently be the lower (his weekly wages remaining the same), the greater the number of weeks in the year he must spend without work and without wages.

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37 ‘This figure is based on official research by the New York State Board of Charities’, Sombart remarks. ‘There are probably many cases of duplication. Otherwise it really would be dreadful.’ New York had in 1897 three and a half million inhabitants.
In view of all these figures, we have the right to speak about a *very considerable* decline in the prosperity of the American worker since 1896. His money wages have declined, while, at the same time, the purchasing power of money has diminished.

**X. The rise of capital**

The deterioration in the situation of the American worker described here has taken place in a decade of colossal economic growth, of really dazzling prosperity, which witnessed an enormous advance of the capitalist class and a massive accumulation of capital. In heavy industry alone, the value of the invested capital grew during this period from $6,524 million to about $9,857 million – a growth of about $3,333 million, i.e. 14 billion marks!

And this accumulation was not reached through scrupulous thriftiness and Puritan simplicity of lifestyle. The growth of capital rather went hand in hand with a mad drive to spend money, which surpassed everything concocted by the great European exploiters in centuries of idle enjoyment and extravagant waste.

Also on this issue we can refer to Sombart:

It may be said indisputably, that the absolute contrasts between poor and rich are nowhere in the world anything like as great as they are in the United States. Above all, this is because the rich over there are so very much richer than the same group in Germany. In America there are certainly more people who own 1,000,000,000 marks than there are people owning 100,000,000 marks in Germany. Anyone who has ever been in Newport, the Baiae of New York, will have picked up the impression that in America having a million is commonplace. There is certainly no other place in the world where the princely palace of the very grandest style is so obviously the standard place of residence, while anyone who has wandered once through Tiffany’s department store in New York will always sense something akin to the odour of poverty in even the most splendid luxury business of large European cities. Because Tiffany’s also has branches in Paris and London, it can serve excellently for drawing comparisons between the extravagance and therefore the wealth of the top four hundred families in the three countries concerned. The managers of the New York head office told me that most of the merchandise they offer for sale in New York comes from Europe, where it is made specially for Tiffany’s of New York. However, it is completely out
of the question that a store in Europe – even Tiffany’s own branches in Paris and London – would stock merchandise at prices such as it would fetch in New York. Only in New York are the dearest items said to be brought in for the woman shopper.\textsuperscript{39}

So fabulous wastefulness goes hand in hand with fabulous accumulation in a land where the bourgeoisie left, both economically and ideologically, the stage of severe Puritanism only a few decades ago! What an enormous growth of exploitation, both in extension and intensity, this sudden transformation implies!

On the one hand, a gigantic growth of wealth, on the other hand, a no less gigantic growth of poverty – truly, the revisionist dogma about the gradual weakening of class contradictions has nowhere been more clearly reduced \textit{ad absurdum}, the doctrines of our Erfurt Programme, which our revisionists wanted to throw to the scrap-heap, have nowhere been more evidently illustrated, than in the great republic on the other side of the ocean.\textsuperscript{40}

These developments are so incontestable and clear-cut, that they had to be attested even by a German professor, who rather inclines towards revisionism. It was a colleague of this professor, Lujo Brentano, who some decades ago, in 1872, directed the coarsest invectives against Karl Marx, to the extent of accusing him of being a liar, because the latter had written in the Inaugural Address of the International Working Men’s Association:

Dazzled by the ‘Progress of the Nation,’ deluded by the figures of the statistics, the Chancellor of the Exchequer exclaims in wild ecstasy: ‘From 1842 to 1852 the taxable income of the country increased by 6 per cent; in the eight years from 1853 to 1861, it has increased from the basis taken in 1853 20 per cent. The fact is so astonishing to be almost incredible . . . This intoxicating augmentation of wealth and power,’ adds Mr. Gladstone, ‘is entirely confined to classes of property.’\textsuperscript{41}

We also find today in the United States an intoxicating augmentation of wealth and power – an increase of more than 50 per cent in a decade as measured by the growth of industrial capital. But this even more intoxicating augmentation of today is not only completely restricted to the possessing

\textsuperscript{39} Sombart 1976, pp. 8–9.
\textsuperscript{40} See Kautsky 1971. An online edition of this book can be found at the site of the Marxists Internet Archive <http://www.marxists.org/>.
\textsuperscript{41} Marx 1974, p. 75.
classes, it goes hand in hand with an absolute deterioration in the situation of the American working class; the progress of some strata being more than counteracted by the retrogression of the great masses. That means, however, that the social position of the proletariat, its participation in the product of national labour, has declined enormously.

**XI. Trade unions and socialism**

Nowhere are the conditions which, according to our revisionists, can assure the economic progress of the working class within the capitalist mode of production, more highly developed than in the United States: complete democracy, the greatest freedom of organisation and the press, the highest possible social equality of rights. Though the reserve of free land has shrunk, it has not yet been completely exhausted. And, on top of that, comes also a strong development of the trade unions.

We have seen that the deterioration in the living standards of the working class dates from 1896. Since that year, there has been a rapid growth of the trade-union organisations. The most important among them, the American Federation of Labor, to which most trade unions belong, had 272,315 members in 1896 as against 1,672,200 members in 1904. Since then, the number of trade-union members has somewhat diminished: in 1905, they were 1,513,200, a decrease of almost 10 per cent.

Some of my good friends will surely distort the meaning of my statements in order to make it appear as if I had declared the trade unions to be useless, or even the cause of the deterioration in the situation of the workers. Of course, that is not my opinion. But the development shows that a force must have appeared, able to paralyse the effects of a trade-union movement begun with so much energy. And one does not need to search much in order to find that force: it is the *trusts*, whose rise in the United States began simultaneously with the already mentioned strengthening of the trade unions, but whose force has grown even more rapidly. They are the force, which directly or indirectly is driving up the prices of all products, while they hinder the corresponding rise in wages, to the point of even depressing them absolutely in some cases.

The trade unions have not lost their significance for that reason, on the contrary, they have become an absolute necessity for the working class, but they have ceased to be an instrument able by itself to drive back capital, to
diminish its exploitation, to undermine its power. These illusions must be rejected. The working class as a whole cannot make any headway against the employers’ combinations through the trade unions alone. To be sure, without the trade unions, the working class would not only fail to make headway, but it would be driven back: it would rapidly lose all its conquests, and sink into hopeless, absolute pauperisation.

If the employers’ combinations have taken from the trade unions the capacity to drive back capital, they have also made them indispensable for the proletariat, in order to avoid being completely crushed by capital. If the isolated worker is already at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the individual capitalist, he sinks into hopeless slavery vis-à-vis the employers’ combinations if he is not protected against them by the trade unions.

But the trade unions have not only become indispensable for the preservation of the position that the worker has already conquered; they can also became, in the present conditions of American, important means for the construction of a great workers’ party with socialist aims.

It is clear that the American workers must, under the above-described conditions, be rendered more and more accessible to socialist ideas. True, socialist propaganda encounters many difficult obstacles in the United States. The most important among them is, as we have already seen, the great number of immigrants in the American proletariat, which not only hardly understand each other, but have grown up under political and social conditions which differ completely from those of their new country, so that they find their way to the tactics demanded by the special American conditions only with great difficulty – and this difficulty increases, the more those immigrants had already been politically active in their country of origin and acquired there firm principles of political praxis. Besides, the complete lack of ‘revolutionary romanticism’, in the theoretical sense, makes the average American in many respects quite crippled for socialist propaganda and action, and opens a wide field of activity for quacks and swindlers.

But, on the other hand, economic development nowhere proceeds more rapidly than in America; nowhere is the capitalist class less bound by transitional strata and traditions to develop all its exploitative tendencies; nowhere are the class contradictions sharpening more rapidly than in America.

The masses have nowhere been forced to rebel against capitalist tyranny as in the United States. Even if this rebellion still temporarily assumes some peculiar form, even if it brings to the fore all sort of demagogues, even if the
growth of the social-democratic party is still temporarily slow and interrupted by momentary reverses, the American proletariat, like the European proletariat, must finally come to the conclusion that only the realisation of the social-democratic programme, that only the expropriation of the expropriators can free them from their yoke, which weighs upon them ever more oppressively.

Whoever ponders upon the facts presented above, must reach with us the conclusion that we must expect a flourishing of socialism in America, not only in the next generations, but considerably earlier. In America, everything happens more rapidly and powerfully than in Europe. If Russia has given us, as we have seen, the first example of a proletariat constituting the most powerful force in the political revolution of a whole country, perhaps America will give us, even before Europe, the example of a proletariat conquering political and economic power in order to establish a socialist society.

Appendix I


In Volume 21 of the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, Werner Sombart published a study on the American working-class movement, which has now appeared as a book under the title Why Is There No Socialism in the United States? We do not have to offer a review of the book, as we have already dealt in detail with the original study in our series of articles on the American worker which appeared in Die Neue Zeit, Vol. 24, No. 1.

Both the study and the book close with the conclusion that the conditions for socialism are developing rapidly in the United States, and that ‘in the next generation Socialism in America will very probably experience the greatest possible expansion of its appeal’.

But, on both occasions, Sombart evades the main issue; namely, whether that flourishing will bear fruit, or, in other words, whether he considers inevitable or even possible the triumph of socialism. That is the central question of the contemporary world, about which every man of character and intelligence must express his opinion. Sombart obstinately refuses to answer it. What can be said about a ‘science’, which, instead of making its representatives capable of finding their right place in the struggles of this world, makes them weak

42 [This note appeared in Die Neue Zeit, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1907, p. 584.]
and characterless and condemns them to waver irresolutely between the powers which are disputing the future: the capitalists and the workers? Our cautious professor tries to please everybody and holds out a prospect of victory to both.

Appendix II

Once Again Sombart’s Book on the American Worker

Our review of Sombart’s book had already appeared, when we received the last volume (No. 7) of the *International Socialist Review*, the scientific journal of our American comrades. It contains a sharp criticism of Sombart’s book, points out a number of contradictions, and accuses it of sensationalism. We draw the attention of all those interested in the subject to this review, and avail ourselves of the opportunity to recommend this excellent journal to those comrades who can read English, especially those who want to study the American working-class movement. It appears in Chicago, Ill., and is published by Charles Kerr & Co., 264 East Kinzie Street ($1 yearly).

The criticism of the *International Socialist Review* was occasioned by the Preface that Sombart appended to his book, where he wrote:

> I decided upon a special edition of the work only after I had become certain that the principal points of my argument were correct. The verdict of American experts on the subject assured me of this, and not only have my bourgeois American friends told me that they agree with me, but the leaders of the Socialist parties have also recognised the correctness of my interpretation – something that seems to me to be even more conclusive. The *International Socialist Review*, the official scholarly journal of the Socialist Party, has even reproduced my articles for its readers, mostly in the full text.

The editors of the *International Socialist Review* remarked about this passage:

> The first chapters of the work reviewed above containing the valuable statistical portions appeared in the *International Socialist Review*. When we came to the nonsense on the condition of the American worker we stopped

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43 [This note appeared in *Die Neue Zeit*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1907, p. 616.]
44 Sombart 1976, p. vi.
further publication. As Sombart used the fact of such publication as an endorsement of his work, we publish the above to make this explanation.\textsuperscript{45}

This explanation of the ‘American experts’ can also be of interest for the German readers, as well as warn them against Sombart’s ‘certainty’.

Translated and edited by Daniel Gaido*

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Sering, Max 1887, Die landwirtschaftliche Konkurrenz Nordamerikas in Gegenwart und Zukunft, Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot.


\textsuperscript{45} [This passage is reproduced in the editors’ notes to the English edition of Sombart’s book. Sombart 1976, pp. 121–2.]

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‘The American Worker’ and the Theory of Permanent Revolution: Karl Kautsky on Werner Sombart’s Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?

Introduction

One of the main peculiarities of American historical development has been the relative political weakness of the American labour movement. The classical bourgeois attempt to analyse the reasons for this phenomenon is Werner Sombart’s famous book Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?, first published in 1906. Though Sombart’s theses have long been a subject of debate among academics in both the US and Europe, it is not generally known that Karl Kautsky, the foremost Marxist theoretician of that period, answered them with a comparative analysis of the peculiarities of capitalist development in Russia, the UK and the US, and their influence on the respective labour movements. Kautsky’s study, published in 1906 in the theoretical journal of the German social

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democracy *Die Neue Zeit* under the title ‘The American Worker’,\(^3\) was part of a series of articles developing the idea that the Russian Revolution of 1905 would go beyond the framework of the classical bourgeois revolutions and lead to ‘the ushering in of an era of European revolutions that will end with the *dictatorship of the socialist society*.\(^4\) In the 1922 Introduction to his book *1905*, Trotsky remarked on Kautsky’s position at that time:

> The debate over the character of the Russian revolution had, even during that period, gone beyond the confines of Russian social democracy and had engaged the attention of the leading elements of world socialism. The Menshevik conception of bourgeois revolution was expounded most conscientiously, that is to say, most badly and candidly, in Cherevanin’s book.\(^5\) As soon as it appeared, the German opportunists seized hold of it with glee. At Kautsky’s suggestion I wrote an analytical review of Cherevanin’s book in *Neue Zeit*.\(^6\) At the time, Kautsky himself fully identified himself with my views. Like Mehring (now deceased), he adopted the viewpoint of ‘permanent revolution.’ Today, Kautsky has retrospectively joined the ranks of the Mensheviks. He wants to reduce his past to the level of his present. But this falsification, which satisfies the claims of an unclear theoretical conscience, is encountering obstacles in the form of printed documents. What Kautsky wrote in the earlier – the better! – period of his scientific and literary activity (his reply to the Polish socialist Lusnia,\(^7\) *his studies on Russian and American workers*, his reply to Plekhanov’s questionnaire concerning the character of the Russian revolution,\(^8\) etc.) was and remains a merciless rejection of Menshevism and a complete theoretical vindication of the subsequent political tactics of the Bolsheviks, whom thickheads and renegades, with Kautsky today at their head, accuse of adventurism, demagogy, and Bakuninism.\(^9\)

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\(^4\) Kautsky 1905b. [Emphasis in the original.]

\(^5\) Tcherewanin 1908.


\(^7\) Kautsky 1904a, pp. 588–98, 620–27, 652–57, 685–95, 732–40. This was a response to the criticism of Kautsky’s 1902 book *The Social Revolution* by the Polish socialist Lusnia, whose real name was C.V. Kelles Krauz. See the praise and extended quotations from this study in the seventh chapter of Trotsky 1978.

\(^8\) Kautsky 1982, pp. 352–403.

\(^9\) Trotsky 1971b, p. viii, emphasis mine.
Kautsky’s study was translated to Russian immediately after its publication, and printed in seven separate editions, usually under the title *The American and Russian Workers*, one of them with a preface by the future Bolshevik People’s Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharskii. In the fourth chapter of his book *Results and Prospects*, which summed up the lessons of the 1905 Revolution, Trotsky included the following extensive reference to *The American Worker*:

In his recent work on the American proletariat, Kautsky points out that there is no direct relation between the political power of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the level of capitalist development on the other. ‘Two states exist’ he says, ‘diametrically contrasted one with the other. In one of them there is developed inordinately, i.e., out of proportion to the level of the development of the capitalist mode of production, one of the elements of the latter, and in the other, another of these elements. In one state – America – it is the capitalist class, while in Russia it is the proletariat. In no other country than America is there so much basis for speaking of the dictatorship of capital, while the militant proletariat has nowhere acquired such importance as in Russia. This importance must and undoubtedly will increase, because this country only recently began to take a part in the modern class struggle, and has only recently provided a certain amount of elbow room for it.’ Pointing out that Germany, to a certain extent, may learn its future from Russia, Kautsky continues: ‘It is indeed most extraordinary that the Russian proletariat should be showing us our future, in so far as this is expressed not in the extent of the development of capital, but in the protest of the working class. The fact that this Russia is the most backward of the large states of the capitalist world would appear’, observes Kautsky, ‘to contradict the materialist conception of history, according to which economic development is the basis of political development; but really’, he goes on to say, ‘this only contradicts the materialist conception of history as it is depicted by our opponents and critics, who regard it not as a method of investigation but merely as a ready-made stereotype.’

We particularly recommend these lines to our Russian Marxists, who replace independent analysis of social relations by deductions from texts, selected

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10 Donald 1993, Appendix, nos. 115–19, 190, 213, pp. 296, 300–301.
to serve every occasion in life. Nobody compromises Marxism so much as these self-styled Marxists.

Thus, according to Kautsky, Russia stands on an economically low level of capitalist development, politically it has an insignificant capitalist bourgeoisie and a powerful revolutionary proletariat. This results in the fact that ‘struggle for the interests of all Russia has fallen to the lot of the only now-existing strong class in the country – the industrial proletariat. For this reason the industrial proletariat has tremendous political importance, and for this reason the struggle for the emancipation of Russia from the incubus of absolutism which is stifling it has become converted into a single combat between absolutism and the industrial proletariat, a single combat in which the peasants may render considerable support but cannot play a leading role. Does not all this give us reason to conclude that the Russian ‘man’ will take power sooner than his ‘master’? ¹²

Kautsky’s study was also commended as a ‘penetrating analysis’ by the leading economist of the Second International, Rudolf Hilferding, in his book *Finance Capital.*¹³

**Werner Sombart and the classical-Marxist theoreticians**

During the early stages of his academic career, Sombart was close to Marxism, or at any rate studied Marx’s theory carefully. In his ‘Supplement and Addendum to Volume 3 of *Capital*’, Engels wrote: ‘In Braun’s *Archiv für soziale Gesetzgebung*, Vol. VII, No. 4, Werner Sombart gives an outline of the Marxian system which, taken all in all, is excellent. It is the first time that a German university professor succeeds on the whole in seeing in Marx’s writings what Marx really says, stating that the criticism of the Marxian system cannot consist of a refutation – “let the political careerist deal with that” – but merely in a further development.’ In March 1895, Engels even sent him a letter developing these ideas and pointing out what he considered to be Sombart’s mistaken views on the law of value and the historical process of formation of an average rate of profit.¹⁴ But, later the same year, the outstanding Marxist historian and revolutionary Franz Mehring was forced to defend Engels’s

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¹² Trotsky 1978, Chapter 4. [Emphasis in the original.]
book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* against Sombart’s endorsement of its supposedly ‘detailed refutation’ by Bruno Hildebrand, a member of the German ‘historical school’ of bourgeois economics founded by Wilhelm Roscher.\(^{15}\)

A year later, Mehring reviewed Sombart’s brochure *Socialism and the Social Movement in the Nineteenth Century* and found it a typical professorial attempt to ‘sublimate’ Marxism in order to reassure the bourgeois public. Though emphasising that he did not consider Sombart to be ‘an ordinary capitalist Know Nothing’, Mehring argued that his attempt to make Marxism legal and respectable by separating economics from politics, theory from praxis, evolution from revolution, etc. would lead him nowhere. He recalled how another academician, Ferdinand Tönnies, also began by upholding an ethic suspended above the class struggles but had lately come out in defence of the Hamburg dockers, and concluded: ‘It is to be hoped that Herr Sombart will also move forwards, but one must not forget that the *Quintessence of Socialism* he has just published contains all the elements that will afterwards enable him to develop for the German Philistines a comforting breviary about “The Lack of Perspectives of Social Democracy”.’\(^{16}\)

Sombart’s response was to launch against Mehring ‘a whole battery of the coarsest personal insults’.\(^{17}\) From then on, both men crossed swords several times, for instance when Sombart, while praising Marx as ‘not only the *praecceptor Germaniae*, but the entire world’s’, rejected his theory of profit in favour of the liberal economist Schulze-Delitsch’s, which defined it as ‘intellectual wages [geistigen Arbeitslohn]’ akin to the salaries of policemen, inventors, clerks and professors.\(^{18}\) On another occasion, Mehring criticised Sombart for arguing, in a ‘cultural association’ created for a workers’ audience (the Bremen Goethebund), that historical materialism was untenable because Goethe had not written *Faust* out of economic motives.\(^{19}\) The father of Russian Marxism, Georgii Plekhanov, also criticised Sombart’s ‘corrections’ of the theory of class struggle in his brilliant Introduction to the second Russian edition of his translation of the *Communist Manifesto*.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{15}\) Mehring 1963a, pp. 26–32.

\(^{16}\) Mehring 1963b, pp. 135–43.

\(^{17}\) Mehring 1963c, pp. 222–8.

\(^{18}\) Mehring 1964, pp. 628–33.

\(^{19}\) Mehring 1966a, pp. 28–33.

Rosa Luxemburg took an active part in the debate against Sombart, refuting for instance his disproportionality theory of crises which attributed them to natural causes (the nature of gold and foodstuff production).\textsuperscript{21} Above all, she repeatedly criticised his attempt to set the German union officials against the socialist leaders on chauvinistic and bourgeois economic grounds. Her first article on this issue, written at Mehring’s instance and with a laudatory prefatory note by him, appeared as early as 1900.\textsuperscript{22} In her classic study \textit{The Mass Strike}, written seven years later and summing up some of the main lessons of the 1905 Russian Revolution, we find the following reference to Sombart:

From the concealment of the objective limits drawn by the bourgeois social order to the trade-union struggle, there arises a hostility to every theoretical criticism which refers to these limits in connection with the ultimate aims of the labour movement. Fulsome flattery and boundless optimism are considered to be the duty of every ‘friend of the trade-union movement.’ But as the social democratic standpoint consists precisely in fighting against uncritical parliamentary optimism, a front is at last made against the social democratic theory: men grope for a ‘new trade-union theory,’ that is, a theory which would open an illimitable vista of economic progress to the trade-union struggle within the capitalist system, in opposition to the social democratic doctrine. Such a theory has indeed existed for some time – the theory of Professor Sombart which was promulgated with the express intention of driving a wedge between the trade-unions and the social democracy in Germany, and of enticing the trade-unions over to the bourgeois position.\textsuperscript{23}

In his path-breaking book on the Jewish question, Kautsky denounced and refuted one of the most unpleasant aspects of Sombart’s nationalism – his anti-semitism – which led him to become a fellow-traveller of the Nazis during the last decade of his life (he died in 1941).\textsuperscript{24} Abram Leon dedicated a whole section of his work on the Jewish question – which, despite its problematic

\textsuperscript{21} Luxemburg 1972b, pp. 382–90.
\textsuperscript{22} Luxemburg 1972c, pp. 767–90.
\textsuperscript{23} Luxemburg 1925, Chapter 7.
\textsuperscript{24} Sombart’s 1912 book \textit{The Future of the Jews} already includes gems like this: ‘Who would want to miss the racy Judiths and Miriams? To be sure, they must be racy and ready to remain so. We cannot tolerate this black-blond mix-up.’ Quoted in Kautsky 1921a, p. 80. Sombart would be glad to know that his opposition to the ‘black-blond mix-up’ is staunchly supported by a certain political tendency in the modern Jewry.
definition of the Jewry as a ‘people’, is the main materialist study of the subject – to a refutation of Sombart’s thesis, advanced in his book *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*, that the Jews were ‘the founders of modern capitalism’.\(^ {25}\)

But, for all their faults, Sombart’s works, because of their wealth of historical data and the insights he gained from his acquaintance with Marx’s work, always remained a subject of deep interest for Marxist theoreticians. That is especially the case of his massive *magnum opus Der moderne Kapitalismus*. When the first part appeared in 1902, Hilferding reviewed it at length,\(^ {26}\) and, thirty-seven years later, Trotsky still considered important to criticise it in one of his last books.\(^ {27}\)

### The revisionist debate

‘The American Worker’ was a continuation of Kautsky’s ongoing struggle against the revisionist right wing of German Social Democracy, as can be seen from the explicit reference, in the section dealing with ‘proletarian ministerialism’, to ‘the *enfant terrible* of revisionism’, Eduard Bernstein. Originally a close friend of Friedrich Engels, Bernstein fell during his period of exile in London under the influence of the Fabian Society, and, in a series of articles first published in *Die Neue Zeit* and collected as a book in 1899 under the title *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy*, undertook a revision of Marxism along reformist lines.\(^ {28}\) At the instigation of Russian, Polish and (oddly enough) English leaders such as Plekhanov, Parvus, Luxemburg, and Belfort Bax,\(^ {29}\) Kautsky finally criticised Bernstein’s attack on the central tenets of Marxism in the pages of *Die Neue Zeit*. His articles were collected in 1899 under the title *Bernstein und das sozialdemokratische Programm. Eine Antikritik*. The book was almost immediately translated to half a dozen languages and became one of the world classics of socialist literature.\(^ {30}\) Thanks to it and to his book *The Agrarian Question*, published

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\(^ {25}\) Leon 1970, Chapter 4, Section A.

\(^ {26}\) Hilferding 1987, pp. 147–60.

\(^ {27}\) Trotsky 1963, pp. 24–51.

\(^ {28}\) Bernstein 1993.

\(^ {29}\) A good selection of documents on the first phase of the Revisionist Controversy, i.e. before the publication of Bernstein and Kautsky’s books, is Tudor and Tudor (eds.) 1988. Cf. Luxemburg 1908. Plekhanov’s articles defending dialectical materialism against Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt can be found in the second volume of his *Selected Philosophical Works*, published in 1981.

\(^ {30}\) No English version is available, but a French one was issued in 1900, see Kautsky 1900.
the same year, Kautsky established his reputation as the main theoretical authority of international Marxism until the outbreak of the First World War.

The section of ‘The American Worker’ dealing with ‘proletarian ministerialism’ also contains an explicit critical reference to the first practical application of the principles of revisionism: in 1899, the French socialist deputy Alexandre Millerand joined the bourgeois ‘government of republican defence’ of Waldeck-Rousseau (together with the butcher of the 1871 Paris Commune, General Gallifet) using the Dreyfus trial as an excuse, in an early application of Stalin’s ‘popular-front’ policy. Lenin summed up the lessons of that experience in What Is to Be Done? as follows:

If Bernstein’s theoretical criticism and political yearnings were still unclear to anyone, the French took the trouble strikingly to demonstrate the ‘new method.’ In this instance, too, France has justified its old reputation of being ‘the land where, more than anywhere else, the historical class struggles were each time fought out to a decision . . .’ (Engels, Introduction to Marx’s The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte). The French socialists have begun, not to theorise, but to act. The democratically more highly developed political conditions in France have permitted them to put ‘Bernsteinism into practice’ immediately, with all its consequences. Millerand has furnished an excellent example of practical Bernsteinism; not without reason did Bernstein and Vollmar rush so zealously to defend and laud him. Indeed, if Social-Democracy, in essence, is merely a party of reform and must be bold enough to admit this openly, then not only has a socialist the right to join a bourgeois cabinet, but he must always strive to do so. If democracy, in essence, means the abolition of class domination, then why should not a socialist minister charm the whole bourgeois world by orations on class collaboration? Why should he not remain in the cabinet even after the shooting-down of workers by gendarmes has exposed, for the hundredth and thousandth time, the real nature of the democratic collaboration of classes? Why should he not personally take part in greeting the tsar, for whom the French socialists now have no other name than hero of the gallows, knout, and exile (knouteur, pendeur et deportateur)? And the reward for this utter humiliation and self-degradation of socialism in the face of the whole world, for the corruption of the socialist consciousness of the working masses – the only basis that can guarantee our victory – the reward for this is pompous projects for
miserable reforms, so miserable in fact that much more has been obtained from bourgeois governments!\textsuperscript{31}

Bernstein’s revisionist theories were condemned in September 1903 at the Dresden Congress of the German Social-Democratic Party, as was Millerand’s ministerialism a year later, at the 1904 Amsterdam Congress of the Second International. But the Dresden ‘victory’ against ‘theoretical revisionism’, like the later ‘victory’ at the September 1905 Jena Congress of the SPD against ‘trade-union’ or ‘practical’ revisionism, proved to be illusory, as we will presently see.

**The Russian Revolution of 1905 and German Social Democracy**

‘The American Worker’ was, like the Industrial Workers of the World,\textsuperscript{32} a product of the Russian Revolution of 1905. More specifically, it was born out of an attempt to offer a materialist analysis of the apparently paradoxical fact that a revolution led by the working class was taking place in one of the most backward areas of Europe, while the socialist movement continued to be relatively weak in the most highly developed industrial country: the United States.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 first confronted the parties of the Second International with practical revolutionary tasks after a spell of reaction of more than thirty years, following the massacre of the Parisian Communards in 1871. The Russian masses, by creating the councils of workers’ delegates (Soviets) and implementing measures such as the workers’ control of production, went in practice beyond the framework of the bourgeois state and society, and literally forced the best Marxist theoreticians of the period to come to terms with the crucial issue of the link between the minimum programme of democratic political and social reforms attainable within the framework of capitalist society, and the maximum programme demanding the expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the socialisation of the means of production.

The centre of Marxist theoretical elaboration before the outbreak of the First World War was not Empire of the Czars but Germany, the home of Marx and Engels and of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), the

\textsuperscript{31} Lenin 1902, Chapter 1, Section 1.
\textsuperscript{32} See Cannon 1973b.
major party of the Second International. The undisputed fountain spring of Marxist theory for the world socialist movement was the SPD’s theoretical journal *Die Neue Zeit*, edited by Kautsky. In a 1908 article commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Die Neue Zeit*, Trotsky described the relationship between German and Russian socialism as follows:

The most frequent reproach made to the Russian party since its creation has been that it sees Russian life through German spectacles. . . . The reason for this reproach was the deep influence of German Social Democracy on the Russian party. But that influence was only possible because the German glasses had been built according to the laws of the international optics of the class struggles. . . . One of the strongest organs of the influence of the German party on Russian Social Democracy was *Die Neue Zeit*.33

After explaining the crucial role of the journal in propagating the ideas of Marxism among the Russian intelligentsia, especially during the revisionist controversy, Trotsky continued:

Even before the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, when many European comrades, for easily understandable reasons, refused to take the Russian socialists seriously, *Die Neue Zeit* was an indefatigable supporter of the interests of the Russian Revolution before the forum of European socialism. During the revolution, it was with us and for us, not only at the time of our successes, but also during the difficult moments of our defeats. While the innumerable raisonneurs whispered their venomous sermons in our ears; while the liberal rabble obstinately repeated that we had nothing in common with the reasonably legal, respectable, moderate tactics of the European socialist parties; while the reactionary press shouted at the top of its voice that we were nothing but anarchists who put on our shoulders the honest tunic of the German Social Democracy in order to hide our criminal purposes; we could always, with the fullest assurance, show them the latest number of *Die Neue Zeit* and from its pages hurl in the face of our opponents and enemies the proud words: *We are flesh of the flesh and blood of the blood of international socialism*.34

We see that, at that time, even the leaders of the most extreme sections of the Russian social democracy considered themselves faithful disciples of the

33 Trotsky 1908, p. 7.
34 Trotsky 1908, p. 10, emphasis in the original.
SPD leaders Bebel and Kautsky rather than as part of a left tendency within the Second International. As Trotsky put it, up to August 4, 1914 ‘Lenin considered Kautsky as his teacher and stressed this everywhere he could. . . . Speaking of Menshevism as the opportunist wing of the Social Democracy, Lenin compared the Mensheviks not with Kautskyism but with revisionism. Moreover he looked upon Bolshevism as the Russian form of Kautskyism, which in his eyes was in that period identical with Marxism.’ In order to understand the significance of ‘The American Worker’, it is important to realise why Lenin saw himself for so long as ‘only a translation into the language of Russian conditions of the tendency of Bebel-Kautsky’.

The rediscovery of the theory of permanent revolution

In retrospect, it is clear that the most important theoretical result of the 1905 Russian Revolution was the rediscovery by a brilliant group of Marxist intellectuals of the theory of permanent revolution, first elaborated by Marx and Engels in March 1850 in the ‘Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League’. The group included, besides Trotsky, Russians such as Parvus (Alexander Helphand), Poles such as Rosa Luxemburg, and Germans such as Franz Mehring and Karl Kautsky; though not all of them employed the term in the finished sense Trotsky did, namely as implying the wholesale collectivisation of the means of production. Trotsky’s mentor and close collaborator during the revolution, Parvus, for instance, limited its perspectives to a thorough democratisation of Russian economic and political life and the instauration of a reformist labour government along Australian lines.

But, within Russian social democracy, this perspective was represented before 1917 only by a tiny tendency led by Leon Trotsky, who rejected the artificial limitation of the Russian revolution to bourgeois demands and upheld the idea that the dictatorship of the proletariat could be established in backward

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35 Trotsky 1973a, p. 132, emphasis in the original.
36 Ibid.
37 ‘Le but de l’association est la déchéance de toutes les classes privilégiées, de soumettre ces classes à la dictature des prolétaires en maintenant la révolution en permanence jusqu’à la réalisation du communisme, qui doit être la dernière forme de constitution de la famille humaine.’ Marx-Engels, 1977, pp. 568–69 and 1080–1.
38 The phrase ‘permanent revolution’ was used to analyse the 1905 Russian Revolution, independently of Trotsky, in Luxemburg 1972a, pp. 485–90; Kautsky 1905a, pp. 460–8, 492–9, 529–37; Mehring 1966b, pp. 84–8.
39 The main collection of articles by Parvus on the 1905 Revolution remains untranslated: see Parvus 1906. In French see Parvus 1905.
Russia, where serfdom was abolished as late as 1861. He argued that the peasantry, geographically dispersed and politically inarticulate, was incapable of playing an independent political role: it could only come to power under the leadership of the revolutionary section of the urban population. Since the Russian bourgeoisie had shifted to the camp of counterrevolution, only the industrial proletariat, numerically small but highly concentrated and class-conscious, could provide this leadership. Once in power, Trotsky continued, the proletariat would be compelled to go beyond the democratic tasks and place collectivism on the order of the day: the Russian revolution could therefore triumph only as a socialist revolution. The survival of a workers’ government established on such primitive economic basis would ultimately depend on the success of the socialist revolution in the West.\footnote{For a more detailed analysis of these issues see Trotsky 1973c, pp. 55–73. The Marxist Internet Archive edition, taken from the appendix to Trotsky’s biography of Stalin, carries the title: ‘The Character of the Russian Revolution as Foreseen by Plekhanov, Lenin and Trotsky’.}

The 1905 Revolution found the Russian Marxists split into two main tendencies, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, not, however, over strategic but over organisational issues, Lenin demanding a greater degree of centralisation than his opponents due to the lack of democratic liberties in the autocratic Russian régime. The revolution led to a programmatic break between them. While the Mensheviks clung to the idea that the future of the democratic revolution depended on maintaining an alliance between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Lenin adopted an intermediate position between Plekhanov and Trotsky. The aim of the Russian revolution, he argued, was to create the best possible conditions for the development of capitalism, and therefore its central problem was the agrarian question. The bourgeoisie, however, was incapable of undertaking this task because the relatively high level of class differentiation within the Third Estate had led to the reactionary degeneration of liberalism. Out of fear of the mass struggle, the capitalists were ready to reach a compromise with the landowners and the Czar (i.e. to betray agrarian reform) which would lead to a slow and painful development of Russian capitalism along Prussian lines. As opposed to the Menshevik strategy of an alliance between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, Lenin argued that the revolution could only triumph as a result of an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, and that it would therefore be forced to make much more serious inroads into private property than the classical bourgeois
revolutions. Those two classes, upon seizing power, would establish a joint ‘democratic dictatorship’, proclaiming the republic, the eight-hour working day and the most radical agrarian reform (including land nationalisation), which would enable Russia to embark in what Lenin called ‘the American path of bourgeois development’.⁴¹ They would, moreover, carry the revolution to the West, where it would immediately assume a socialist character. But, because the peasantry would play the leading role in the revolutionary government, in Russia itself the revolution would stop short of the wholesale socialisation of the means of production.

In the exhilarating atmosphere of the revolution, Lenin sometimes made statements that went beyond that schema. For instance, in September 1905 he wrote: ‘From the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organized proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. We shall not stop half-way.’⁴² And, in a note written a few months later, but not published until 1926, he further argued that the defeat of the Russian workers would be certain unless the Western European socialist proletariat came to their assistance: ‘The second victory will be the socialist revolution in Europe. The European workers will show us “how to do it,” and then, together with them, we shall bring about the socialist revolution.’⁴³ But, for all the insights they provide into the dynamics of Lenin’s thought (and that of his working-class followers), those were no more than outbursts of enthusiasm that contradict the officials statements of Bolshevik policy, as elaborated in Lenin’s theoretical writings of the pre-1917 period.

Kautsky, Lenin and Trotsky

In August 1908, Trotsky wrote to Kautsky that his above-quoted response to Plekhanov, ‘Driving Forces and Prospects of the Russian Revolution’, was ‘the best theoretical statement of my own views, and gives me great political satisfaction’⁴⁴ – in other words, he considered it to be an endorsement of the theory of permanent revolution. Yet, in a review of that study published in the Bolshevik organ Proletarii, Lenin described it as ‘a brilliant vindication of

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⁴³ Lenin 1962a, pp. 91–92, emphasis in the original.
⁴⁴ Trotsky to Kautsky 11 August 1908. Quoted in Donald 1993, p. 91.
the fundamental principles of Bolsheviks tactics’, adding: ‘Kautsky’s analysis satisfies us completely. He has fully confirmed our contention that we are defending the position of revolutionary Social-Democracy against opportunism, and not creating any “peculiar” Bolshevik trend.’

Lenin returned to this idea in his book *The Agrarian Programme of the Social Democracy in the First Russian Revolution, 1905–07*:

The Bolsheviks, ever since the beginning of the revolution in the spring and summer of 1905, clearly pointed to the source of our tactical differences by singling out the concept of peasant revolution as one of the varieties of bourgeois revolution, and by defining the victory of the peasant revolution as ‘the revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry.’ Since then Bolshevism won its greatest ideological victory in international Social Democracy with the publication of Kautsky’s article on the driving forces of the Russian revolution.

At first sight, the endorsement of Kautsky’s analysis by both Trotsky and Lenin might seem paradoxical. Both Russian leaders could see in Kautsky’s answer to Plekhanov a confirmation of their own analysis because the German theoretician, not being able to read Russian and acquaint himself at first hand with the political life of the country, did not want to provide a definite answer to the strategic question separating both Lenin and Trotsky, namely whether the peasantry or the proletariat would play the leading role in the revolutionary government. He just wanted to make it clear that, given the correlation of class forces in Russian society, a bloc of the workers with the bourgeois-liberal Cadets was, in his opinion, out of the question. Agrarian reform was the heart of the democratic revolution, and the bourgeoisie was too closely linked with the landlords and foreign capital and too afraid of the workers to support the confiscation of the landed estates without compensation. The urban petty bourgeoisie, in turn, was too weak to play the role it played in the Paris Commune during the French Revolution. The social-democratic workers would be therefore forced to seize power together with the peasants to carry out the democratic revolution, and, from then on, a whole series of possible scenarios would develop according to the extent of the peasant war, the extension of the revolution beyond Russia’s borders, and so on.

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45 Lenin 1962d, pp. 372–3, emphasis in the original.
46 Lenin 1962d, p. 353, emphasis in the original.
On the whole, Kautsky’s argument tended to support more Trotsky’s formula of ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat leaning upon the peasantry’ than Lenin’s ‘democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry’. For instance, in his 1904 study ‘To What Extent Is the Communist Manifesto Obsolete?’, originally published in German in the Leipziger Volkszeitung (the organ of the SPD left wing, edited by Parvus, Luxemburg and Mehring) and later included as an introduction to a 1905 Polish edition of the Manifesto, Kautsky argued that, due the advanced extent of class differentiation within the Third Estate, ‘today we can nowhere speak of a revolutionary bourgeoisie’. He explicitly referred to the 1850 ‘Address of the Central Committee of the Communist League’ and to ‘a bourgeois revolution, which, becoming permanent, grows beyond its own limits and develops out of itself a proletarian revolution’ – although he did not conclude that it would necessarily lead to the complete collectivisation of the means of production. But, when confronted with the actual revolution in the aftermath of the First World War, Kautsky would shrink from his former revolutionary analysis, as we will later see.

**Kautsky’s earlier writings on American socialism**

To return to ‘The American Worker’, some readers may wonder what Kautsky’s qualifications for writing that piece might have been, given the fact that he never lived in the United States. It could be argued in his defence that he was not only the undisputed theoretical leader of a world-wide mass workers’ organisation – the Second International – but knew English perfectly, as well as four other modern languages and two ancient ones. He clearly followed the American scene closely and his interest in the US labour movement was neither occasional nor that of a detached outsider. The Sachregister of Blumenberg’s bibliography of Kautsky’s writings lists thirty-one items on American political and economic issues, ranging from 1880 to 1934, of which nineteen dealt specifically with the US labour movement. Among the latter, besides the item on Sombart, we find a 1880 note on the American union federations, a 1886 article on the Knights of Labor and the struggle for the eight-hour working day, an 1887 article on ‘Socialism in Russia and America’, and five letters to American labour newspapers. Of this material, we will

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47 Kautsky 1904b, pp. 155–64.
48 Blumenberg 1960.
49 Kautsky 1902b; 1902c; 1907; 1908; 1909f.
only review the pieces that appeared in Die Neue Zeit, which, as a theoretical organ, tended to publish longer articles summing up the polemics carried out in daily newspapers such as Vorwärts.

In 1889, Kautsky published a review of Edward Bellamy’s famous utopian novel Looking Backward, 2000–1887, which he considered worthless as a work of art. The plot was absurd, the characters foolish, and the author had not understanding whatsoever of the modern labour movement: the commonwealth of the future was full of housewives, preachers and rich people no longer anxious about losing their fortune. But the book was nevertheless significant:

Socialism has until now been an exotic growth in America; it was considered a German product. And in fact the socialist movement, if not composed exclusively of Germans, was an outgrowth of German socialism. The task of creating, on the foundation of international scientific socialism, a truly American labour party, with its own literature, programme and tactics, is just now beginning to be undertaken. In view of this situation, Bellamy’s book has a great symptomatic significance. It shows the power of the American labour movement; the fact that it forces to deal with social problems even bourgeois circles which are neither theoretically nor practically under the influence of European socialism.

Given the anti-theoretical cast of mind of the American workers, Kautsky concluded, Looking Backward could even prove useful as propaganda material.50 In the end, the book gave birth to an ephemeral but for a time numerically considerable network of so-called ‘Nationalist clubs’, composed mostly of clerks and academic middle-class advocates of the nationalisation of the means of production.

Kautsky returned to the subject of the American worker six years later, in a very interesting short notice written in defence of Friedrich Sorge, whose history of the American labour movement was then being serialised by Die Neue Zeit. Sorge had chastised the sectarian Socialist Labor Party for refusing to take part in the New York election campaign of 1886 (the labour ticket’s candidate was Henry George, but Sorge argued that Marxists had to take part in it as an organised tendency, because the masses were flocking to its support and therefore the election provided an excellent opportunity for educating and recruiting workers), for supporting the Progressive Labor Party

50 Kautsky 1889, pp. 268–76.
(the left split from the 1886 labour ticket) only a few days before the 1887 elections, for failing to come to the defence of the Haymarket Square martyrs on the grounds that they were anarchists, and for belittling the trade-union movement on the basis that it was not socialist. Above all, he dismissed as hopelessly sectarian the Socialist Labor Party’s attempt to set up its own minuscule ‘red unions’ under the pretentious name of Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance of the United States and Canada. The newspaper edited by Daniel De Leon retorted by calling Sorge’s pieces ‘humoristic articles’ and ‘side-splitting harlequinades’, and described their author as ‘an otherwise harmless and law-abiding German inhabitant of Hoboken’.

Kautsky was clearly shocked by that torrent of abuse: ‘Our American reports by the pen of F.A. Sorge,’ he wrote,

are generally recognised, even in enemy circles, as extraordinarily valuable and instructive contributions to the understanding of the American labour movement. That is not however the opinion of our American sister organ, The People of New York. . . . In Europe it is, to put it mildly, quite unusual for a party organ to employ such a language against a comrade, who is not some newly arrived youngster, but a veteran who took part in the great struggles of 1848 and 1849, and since his emigration to America has been an untiring worker for the proletarian cause, the trusted friend of Marx and Engels, and the soul of the [First] International in America.

He attributed the SLP’s vicious style to a sectarianism born of the particularly hostile American conditions:

Just now Social Democracy had nowhere to struggle against such difficulties as in America. The disunion and petty jealousies among the different socialist organisations are if possible even greater than in England. While in the latter these drawbacks have to a certain extent been balanced by great advances in the socialist consciousness of the proletariat, the mental effervescence lately to be seen in America has not yet led to a considerable furtherance of the socialist movement. On the contrary, some socialist organisations have even experienced a decline. Whether the fault lies in the American workers or in the socialists, whether the former are too limited and egoistical or the latter do not sufficiently understand the workers, or finally whether both are to be blamed for that situation – that is difficult to determine from here. But it is clear that, just as such a situation demands criticism, it must lead to particularly irritable reactions to it.
He asked the De Leonites to stoop the flood of invectives (‘let us call them Americanisms’) and concluded: ‘Sorge’s reports cannot be more outstandingly vindicated than by the article in *The People*. We are very glad to announce the launching, in the coming numbers of *Die Neue Zeit*, of a long series of articles by our venerated friend, which have for some time been in our hands but whose publication had until now been delayed due to lack of space’.\(^5\)

It should be added that, on this issue, Kautsky was in complete agreement with Engels, who recommended the publication of Sorge’s work in book form to the SPD publishing house, although, in the end, nothing came of this proposal. In a letter sent from London dated 12 May 1894, Engels wrote to Sorge:

> The Social Democratic Federation here shares with your German American Socialists [the SLP] the distinction of being the only parties that have managed to reduce the Marxist theory of development to a rigid orthodoxy, which the workers have not to reach themselves by their own class feeling, but which they have to gulp down as an article of faith at once and without development. That is why both of them remain mere sects and come, as Hegel says, from nothing through nothing to nothing.\(^6\)

Sorge’s book was finally published in English during the 1970s and 1980s in two volumes, the first of which was unfortunately edited by the Stalinist historian Philip Foner, who managed both to praise Sorge in the preface as the father of American Marxism and to describe him in the footnotes as a white-supremacist, male-chauvinist sectarian.\(^7\)

### Kautsky and the American correspondents to *Die Neue Zeit*

Kautsky received regular reports on US conditions from correspondents to *Die Neue Zeit* who either lived in or visited the United States. The visitors included Marx’s daughter Eleanor Marx Aveling and her partner Edward Aveling, whose book on the situation of the working class in the United States first appeared as a series of articles in *Die Neue Zeit*.\(^8\) The Austro-British publicist and historian of socialism Max Beer also spent some time in New

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51 Kautsky 1895, pp. 183–5.
52 Marx and Engels 1953, p. 263.
54 Aveling and Marx Aveling 1969.
York and wrote many articles on American issues. But most of the reports were sent by American socialist leaders such as Sorge, Algie Simons, Louis Boudin, Algernon Lee, Morris Hillquit, William English Walling, and, last but not least, Hermann Schlüter, the eminent historian of the labour movement and editor of the German organ of the Socialist Party’s left-wing *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, whose major books on the First International in America and on the Chartist movement in England still remain to be translated to English.

In the first Appendix to ‘The American Worker’, Kautsky praised the theoretical organ of the left wing of the Debsian Socialist Party, the *International Socialist Review*, at that time edited by Algie Martin Simons, who also translated to English, together with his wife Mary, two of Kautsky’s best books: *The Social Revolution* (1902) and *The Road to Power* (1909). In Section V of ‘The American Worker’ (‘Capitalism in the United States’) there is an explicit reference to Simons’s brochure *Class Struggles in America*, first published in 1903, as ‘the excellent work of Comrade Simons, recently published, which offers a short synopsis of the socioeconomic development of the United States from its beginnings’. Simons’s booklet, published by the SP left-wing publishing house owned by Charles H. Kerr, grew in successive editions from 32 pages in 1903, to 64 in the second edition of 1906 quoted by Kautsky, to 120 pages in the third edition of 1907. A German version was published in 1909 as a supplement to *Die Neue Zeit*. When an enlarged 325-pages-long edition by Macmillan appeared two years later under the more misleading title *Social Forces in American History*, Kautsky praised it as follows:

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56 Boudin 1906. A German version was published three years later with a fascinating introduction by Kautsky, mainly dealing with the bourgeois subjective theory of value (‘marginal utility’ theory) and individualist ethics, and praising the book as the best overall refutation of the critics of Marx: Boudin 1909. A Russian version of the book by Vera Zasulich was published in St. Petersburg in 1908, and reissued after the Bolshevik Revolution in Moscow in 1920.

57 The German version of Hillquit’s *History of Socialism in the United States* was the main source on the history of American socialism for European continental Marxists. In his autobiography, Trotsky described Hillquit as ‘the ideal socialist leader for successful dentists’.

58 Schlüter 1918; 1916. The first version of Schlüter’s book on Chartism, published as a brochure, was reviewed by Engels and this review now appears in the German edition of the Marx-Engels Collected Works (MEGA). Schlüter wrote an important historical work in English: Schlüter 1965. See also the highly laudatory review of one of his early books by Franz Mehring. Mehring 1907, pp. 347–9, also published in this issue.

It is not necessary to offer a description of the contents of this book to the readers of the Die Neue Zeit. We have already published as a supplement, in 1909, a work by comrade Simons called Class Struggles in America, which contained the main ideas of the present work. He has now expanded and polished that short overview, making it more clear and persuasive. It is to be desired that it will also appear in German. It is valuable both as an illustration of the fruitfulness of the materialist conception of history, and as a new building stone for the construction of a single universal materialist history, which is gradually reaching its completion. In its present form, the book presupposes that the reader is already acquainted with the most important facts of American history. But it should not be difficult for German readers to add by themselves the necessary information. They will receive therewith a quite clear overview of the history of the United States.\(^{60}\)

However, Kautsky’s praise for Simons’s book should not be interpreted as an unqualified endorsement of its theses, which for a contemporary reader are obviously marred by populist and racist prejudices – notably in the analysis of the Civil War and Reconstruction. When Simons’s book The American Farmer appeared in 1902,\(^{61}\) Kautsky wrote a laudatory review, which however warned that the book tended to blur the dividing line between the workers and the rural middle class. Though both classes should strike together against their common exploiters, Kautsky argued, they should organise separately, because the Socialist Party could not cater to the prejudices of a historically doomed class.\(^{62}\) It is important to remember in this context that Kautsky’s major book The Agrarian Question, which appeared three years earlier, was, like his book against Bernstein, born of a polemic against petty-bourgeois revisionists within the SPD. In the 1894 Frankfurt Congress and the subsequent 1895 Breslau Congress of the SPD, the Marxists engaged in a major debate with the leaders of the ‘agrarian revisionists’, Eduard David and Georg von Vollmar. These figures were based in South-Western Germany, a region where the small peasant class was particularly numerous, and demanded protective measures in order to retard its demise, even at the expense of the workers’ living standards. Clearly, Kautsky detected similar leanings in Simons’s work.\(^{63}\)

\(^{60}\) Kautsky 1912.
\(^{61}\) Simons 1975.
\(^{62}\) Kautsky 1902a.
\(^{63}\) Salvatori 1979, pp. 48–59.
Simons did not understand or heed Kautsky’s advice. In the December 1905 issue of the *International Socialist Review*, he reprinted Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay on the significance of the frontier in American history with an introduction describing it as ‘without doubt the greatest contribution yet made in the application of the materialistic conception of history to American conditions’.\(^{64}\) Seven years later, we find him arguing, in an article entitled ‘No Populism in the American Socialist Party’, that the agrarian programme adopted by the May 1912 Indianapolis convention of the Socialist Party at his initiative made no principled concessions to the small agricultural capitalists.\(^{65}\) As a result of these unresolved contradictions, Simons began to shift steadily to the right from 1905 on, and, after the outbreak of the First World War, went all the way down from serving as an organiser for the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion, to become director of the personnel department of an industrial corporation, teacher of business management at the University of Wisconsin, a Hoover supporter in 1928, and, finally, a campaigner against public health insurance on behalf of the American Medical Association.\(^{66}\)

**Imperialism and the labour aristocracy**

The main shortcoming of ‘The American Worker’ is the scant attention Kautsky pays to the issue of imperialism and its impact on the labour movement, especially by furthering the development of a labour aristocracy and bureaucracy in the imperialist countries. That was due to the fact that European Marxist theoreticians began to deal with those issues at length for the first time the following year (1907) when a major debate on the colonial question took place at the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International.\(^{67}\) As part of the controversy over the colonial question Parvus published his work *The Colonial Policy and the Collapse of Capitalism*, never translated to English though commended by Kautsky and Hilferding,\(^{68}\) and Kautsky his brochure on socialism and colonialism which, besides offering a pioneering materialist analysis of modern imperialism, contains some profound remarks on the

\(^{64}\) Kreuter and Kreuter 1969, pp. 66, 71; Shannon 1967, pp. 18–19.

\(^{65}\) Simons 1913, pp. 597–602.

\(^{66}\) Glaser 1955, pp. 419–34. This hostile article by a bourgeois historian contains some remarkable insights into Simon’s peculiar blend of populism and Marxism.

\(^{67}\) See Petith 1969, pp. 325–37 and Lenin 1962c, pp. 75–81.

\(^{68}\) Parvus 1907. See the laudatory review of this book by Hilferding: Hilferding 1907, pp. 687–8.
peculiarities of US historical development (see especially Chapter 4: ‘Work Colonies’ and 5: ‘Old Style Exploitation Colonies’). Three years later, the Austro-Marxist economist Rudolf Hilferding would publish his magnum opus *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*. Together with the 1902 study by the British economist John A. Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study*, Hilferding’s book provided the theoretical basis for Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, whose immediate aim was to uncover the economic and class reasons for the outbreak of the First World War and the collapse of the Second International.

The analysis of the role of the labour aristocracy and bureaucracy as the social basis of reformism within the working-class movement was pioneered by two ultra-left theoreticians: the American Daniel De Leon in his 1903 brochure *Two Pages from Roman History*, and the Dutch ‘Tribunist’ Anton Pannekoek in his 1909 book *The Tactical Differences in the Labour Movement*. But the conclusions they eventually drew from their analyses were non sequiturs: organisational sectarianism and dual unionism in the case of De Leon; opposition to communist participation in parliamentary elections and trade unions, anti-party ‘council communism’, and an early version of Third Worldism in the case of Pannekoek.

Kautsky dealt with one aspect of these processes, the rise of a counter-revolutionary union bureaucracy, in the last major series of articles he wrote on the United States: a polemic with the SPD right-wing union leaders over the statistics on the standard of living of the American workers and over the counterrevolutionary role of the American union bureaucrat Samuel Gompers on the occasion of his visit to Germany in late 1909. In order to understand the reasons for the heated character of the exchange and its implications, it

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69 Kautsky 1975. Lenin praised it in his book on imperialism, written when he was already a bitter enemy of Kautsky.
70 See the review of this work by Kautsky: Kautsky 1911b, pp. 764–72, 797–804, 838–64, 874–83. A partial English version is available at the Marxist Internet Archive website as *Finance Capital and Crises*.
71 De Leon 1988. In 1920, Lenin wrote to Bukharin: ‘I think we should publish in Russian De Leon’s *Two Pages* with Fraina’s foreword and notes. I shall also write a few words. If you agree, will you give the word through the State Publishing House.’ Lenin 1970, p. 536, emphasis in the original. Louis Fraina (Lewis Corey), a protégé of De Leon, was the ideologist of early American communism.
72 Pannekoek 1909. This still untranslated brochure was reviewed and praised by Lenin: Lenin 1963b, pp. 347–52.
is necessary to comprehend how the decline in the political temperature of Europe after the failure of the 1905 Russian Revolution affected the inner life of the SPD.

Under the invigorating influence of the 1905 Russian Revolution, the Jena Congress of the SPD convened in September of 1905, had adopted a resolution endorsing the use of the mass political strike in the fight for electoral and other democratic rights, although, at the instance of Bebel, it was described as a defensive tactic against the expected assault of the bourgeoisie on the growing gains of the socialist movement. However, at a secret conference of the SPD executive [Parteivorstand] and the general commission of ‘free’ (i.e. social-democratic) trade unions, led by its chairman Carl Legien, held on 16 February 1906, the party executive pledged itself ‘to try to prevent a mass strike as much as possible’. If it were nevertheless to break out, the party would assume the sole burden of leadership: the trade unions would not participate in it officially, and agreed only ‘not to stab it in the back’. The costs of a general strike would have to be covered by the party alone – an obvious impossibility. The agreement amounted to a practical annulment of the resolution of the Jena Congress, and was soon ratified by the resolution of the September 1906 Mannheim Congress, again drafted by Bebel, explicitly recognising that the party executive could undertake no action which the trade unions would not approve of, thus giving them effective control over the SPD. The unions’ source of strength lay not only in their membership, which was more than twice that of the Party, but above all in their financial resources: in the fiscal year 1906–7 their income was fifty times greater than the party income. The radical Leipiziger Volkszeitung (edited by Luxemburg and Mehring) drew from these events the bitter conclusion that ten years of struggle against revisionism had been in vain, ‘for the revisionism we have killed in the party rises against in greater strength in the trade unions’.

During all these struggles, and indeed several years before them and up to the end of 1909, Kautsky remained a steadfast supporter of the revolutionary wing of the SPD (whose strongholds were the women’s organisation, the youth movement and the Party school) and one of its main mouthpieces before the Second International. In 1902, he had published a book called The Social Revolution, whose Second Edition in 1907, revised in order to sum up the lessons of the 1905 Russian Revolution, was hailed as a triumph for

74 Schorske 1970, pp. 28–58. For the income figures see p. 93.
Bolshevism by Lenin. In 1905, he wrote an enthusiastic introduction to a book by Henriette Roland-Holst (a close associate of Luxemburg) on the mass strike, which alarmed the cautious Bebel. Then, besides the series of articles we have already mentioned defending the theory of permanent revolution, in 1909, Kautsky wrote what Lenin considered his best book, *The Road to Power*, defending the traditional Marxist ideas that ministerialism and budget voting were tantamount to moral and political suicide, and affirming more clearly than before the revolutionary implications of imperialism. The SPD executive sternly opposed the publication of the book and demanded the watering down of a series of passages, fearing that they would bring down on them a trial for high treason (Karl Liebknecht was then serving a prison sentence for this brochure *Militarism and Anti-Militarism*). Kautsky finally agreed that the theses of the book should be presented as his personal opinion and not as an official statement of party policy, to the great indignation of his friend and future Spartakusbund leader Clara Zetkin.

**Kautsky’s polemic with the union bureaucracy**

In *The Road to Power*, Kautsky showed that the purchasing power of US wages had stagnated for more than a decade, in spite of all the industrial struggles of the American workers, and argued that the rise in nominal wages had been more than counteracted by the rise in prices (in no little measure due to the growth of trusts and employers’ organisations) and by the increase in the intensity of labour, as reflected especially in the growth of piece-wages. This led to a furious exchange with the organs of the trade-union right wing, especially the *Grundstein* and the *Korrespondenzblatt der Generalkomission der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*, which accused him of being ‘an opponent of union organisation’ and of ‘belittling and undervaluing’ trade-union work.

Kautsky countered by arguing that the industrial struggles could raise wages at a given moment, but could not determine their long-term evolution, which depended on deeper economic processes. Given a rising tendency, the unions could raise wages more quickly; given a declining one, they could slow down their diminution. But they could not control these tendencies at will as the reformists argued. The unions were able ‘to maintain wages at a

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relatively higher level than they would otherwise reach, but they cannot guarantee an uninterrupted absolute rise in wages’. If they wanted to be able to withstand the concentrated power of the capitalists and their state, they were forced to become more and more political and had to be prepared to employ their most powerful weapon, the mass political strike.

The English trade unions understood perfectly well that they could no more move forward with purely economic methods, and constituted themselves into a political party, which has already given them considerable influence. The strength of the Austrian proletariat also rests on the intimate collaboration between the party and the unions. They would never dream of such a thing as rigorously separating both fields. Each political struggle of the Social Democracy is also a struggle of the unions, and each industrial struggle also a concern of the party.

In Germany the spheres of influence of both organisations are still strongly separated due to historical causes, though that has not proved to be to the advantage of the proletariat. But the great struggles that we are going to confront will closely unite the party and the unions into one mighty phalanx, in which both parts will not hamper each other, but on the contrary will encourage and strengthen each other for the fight.

To accelerate this process by laying stress on those great goals that can only be achieved through a common struggle of the party and the unions, by emphasising the growing impotence to which isolation will condemn both sides – that was the major task that I set myself while writing *The Road to Power*.

I did not completely realise at that time, that by doing that I was going to raise the opposition of the mere routiniers, whose hearts have been weakened by treading the beaten path. But even among them I had expected more understanding than what I found in my critic of the *Korrespondenzblatt*. He has placed himself in the camp of Rexhäufer and Gompers.

The exchange over the American statistics was only the first round in the polemic between Kautsky and the SPD union organs. When Samuel Gompers, the leader of the American Federation of Labor, visited Germany in late 1909, he was praised by the leader of the trade-union right wing of the SPD, Karl Legien, as ‘a true revolutionary, who seeks to unite the proletarian masses’.

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78 Kautsky 1909b, p. 523. Emphasis in the original.
79 Kautsky 1909c, p. 832.
Kautsky reminded Legien that ‘Gompers is an opponent, not only of the special form that the socialist movement has assumed in America, but above all an opponent of the proletarian class struggle’.\(^80\) After quoting one of Gompers’s typical Panglossian tirades about the harmony and trust that should prevail between the capitalists, their government and their wage slaves, Kautsky added:

It cannot be said that this blissful trustfulness stems from the fact that in America the government and the capitalists are especially friendly towards the workers. There is scarcely a more unscrupulous and vulgar capitalist class than the American, and there is scarcely a country in which the capitalist class has a more exclusive control of the means of political power, in which the laws are more shamelessly manipulated (and, when profitable, violated) for the benefit of the capitalists and to the detriment of the workers, than the United States. Nevertheless Gompers is full of trust.

His babbling about class harmony is however not an occasional speech to please the bourgeoisie but the true content of his political work. Thanks to it he has been able to become vice-president of the Civic Federation, a capitalist foundation created some years ago due to the rise of American socialism, which set itself the task of ‘bringing together’ workers and bourgeois. In actual fact it is an organisation of struggle against socialism and the proletarian class struggle, which, thanks to the large amounts of money at its disposal, is able to conduct an energetic propaganda.\(^81\)

Of course, the union bureaucrat took pains to hide those facts from his European audiences:

Gompers plays his double role as president of the AFL and vice-president of the Civic Federation only in America. In Europe he appears exclusively as president of the union federation. He forgot his role as vice-president of a bourgeois institution while crossing the ocean. Mr. Gompers plays to the role of socialist-eater only in stages where his claque is a sure one. Caution is the best part of bravery.\(^82\)

In fact, Gompers had travelled to Europe in order to look for support there, after the spectacular failure of his policies had undermined his position in the US.

\(^80\) Kautsky 1909d, p. 678, emphasis in the original.
\(^81\) Kautsky 1909d, p. 679, emphasis in the original.
\(^82\) Kautsky 1909d, p. 680.
He praises his ‘labour policy’ as if it were to be thanked for the fact that the standard of living in America is higher than in Europe. That is ridiculous humbug. The higher standard of living of the American workers has not been won during the last years but inherited from their ancestors. It was above all a consequence of the previous presence of unappropriated lands, from which everyone who wanted to become independent received as much as he needed. . . . But this superiority, about which Mr. Gompers is so conceited, is rapidly disappearing.

That is clearly proved by the drying up of the German emigration to America. A few decades ago, a German worker still improved his situation considerably by emigrating to the United States; for that reason many went there to make their fortune. Today the superiority of American living standards has become so minimal, that emigration doesn’t pay anymore.

The German worker has in general raised his standard of living during the last decades, while that of the American worker has declined. According to the often-mentioned 1896 statistics, the buying power of his wages stood 4.2 percent above the average for the decade 1890–99. In 1905 it was only 1.5 percent above the average, and even that percentage must surely have diminished as a consequence of the crisis.

Precisely during the decade in which the American labour movement was dominated by Mr. Gompers, the upward movement of the American working class reached a standstill.

We know very well, that that depended on factors for which Gompers is not accountable. The exhaustion of the reserve of free lands, the influx of masses of workers with lower living standards, the appearance of large-scale industrial enterprises in the South, and, last but not least, the strengthening of the capitalist associations have brought about this result.

But that also proves that Gompers has no real reason for bragging about the superiority of American over European working conditions, presenting it before the European workers as the fruit of his policy of harmony and trust.

Mr. Gompers has not created the degrading tendencies of capitalism nowadays so strongly at work in America, but he has done his best to pave the way for them, because his policy of class cooperation has condemned the proletariat to complete political impotence.

The proletariat can only acquire political power by uniting in a special political class organisation. Gompers and his men have exerted all their influence to make such an organisation impossible. The proletarians must
not build a special workers’ party, but sell their votes to the highest bidder among the bourgeois candidates – not, of course, in the vulgar sense of selling their votes for money, but of giving them to those bourgeois candidates who make them more promises.

A more ridiculous, corrupting and politically demoralising policy is hardly imaginable. Thanks to it there is no democratic industrial land in which the worker is treated with more contempt by the government, and especially by the judicial power, than America.83

In the presidential elections of 1908, Gompers had prevailed on the AFL to support the Democratic candidate Bryan, who was defeated by the Republican candidate Taft. After that fiasco, Gompers left for Europe seeking for support among his fellow bureaucrats. Kautsky concluded his article by advising his comrades ‘to be always mindful that every hand they raise to applaud Gompers, is a slap in the face of our American party comrades, who have no more dangerous and poisonous enemy than Samuel Gompers’.84

In a second article against Gompers, Kautsky was forced to come to the defence of the Debsian SP left-wing German organ, the New Yorker Volkszeitung, which had been accused by the Korrespondenzblatt of advocating a split among the ranks of the AFL.85 On the contrary, Kautsky argued, the policy of the Volkszeitung had always been to preserve the unity of the American industrial organisations while fighting against the Gompersian spirit of the AFL. Kautsky called the Civic Federation ‘a gang of the filthiest and most bitter among our enemies’, and wondered how Legien could consider himself a friend of Gompers.86 While Gompers’s visit to Germany lasted, the controversy continued to rage over the pages of the social-democratic press.87

We have already remarked that Kautsky’s criticism of Gompers was a projection of the struggle against the German union bureaucracy waged by the revolutionary wing of social democracy.88 The international character of that struggle for the subordination of the unions to the revolutionary leadership of the party is shown by the fact that Lenin’s views on Gompers and Legien

83 Kautsky 1909d, pp. 680–1, emphasis in the original.
84 Kautsky 1909d, p. 685.
85 For a Trotskyist overview of the Debsian Socialist Party, see Cannon 1973a, pp. 245–310.
86 Kautsky 1910a, pp. 132–7.
87 Kautsky 1909c, pp. 253–4. See also Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften (Korrespondenzblatt) 1909 and Kautsky’s response, Kautsky 1910e.
88 Kautsky 1901; 1906b.
were virtually identical to Kautsky’s.\textsuperscript{89} As late as 31 January 1911, we find Lenin addressing him a letter asking for an article, to be published by the legal Russian Marxist journal \textit{Mysl}, against the neutrality of the trade unions vis-à-vis the party\textsuperscript{90} – a position Kautsky had criticised in his review of Legien’s brochure \textit{The German Trade-Union Movement}.\textsuperscript{91}

\textbf{Kautsky’s attitude towards the labour-party tactic}

At the October 1908 meeting of the International Socialist Bureau, Lenin criticised Kautsky’s resolution supporting the affiliation of the British Labour Party to the Second International. Lenin agreed with the admission of the Labour Party, but, since it was not a socialist organisation pursuing a class policy fully independent of the bourgeoisie, he proposed an amendment to Kautsky’s resolution describing it as ‘the first step on the part of the really proletarian organisations of Britain towards a conscious class policy and towards a socialist workers’ party’. The rectification of the sectarian errors of the Social-Democratic Federation could not be done by giving ‘even a shadow of encouragement to other, undoubted and not less important errors of the British opportunists who lead the so-called Independent Labour Party’.\textsuperscript{92} Though, at that time, Lenin described the incident as just ‘a slight awkwardness in Kautsky’s resolution’, it is retrospectively significant because of Kautsky’s later political evolution, and also because his last significant text on the American labour movement was a 1909 polemical article against Karl Radek on the perspectives for the formation of a labour party in Great Britain and the US, and the attitude Marxists should adopt towards it. As in many of Kautsky’s works, the brilliant historical analysis is marred by its rather equivocal political conclusions, leading in practice to an adaptation to the reformist union and party bureaucracy.

Kautsky distinguished between two models of historical development: the European continental type, as illustrated by German social democracy, and the Anglo-Saxon type, which could be best studied in England, but was also strongly developed in North America and Australia. The great difference

\textsuperscript{89} On Gompers and the AFL, see Lenin 1970, pp. 56–7 and 100–4. On the AFL see Kerry 1980; 1998.
\textsuperscript{90} Lenin 1964c, pp. 255–67.
\textsuperscript{91} Kautsky 1911a, pp. 418 ff.
\textsuperscript{92} Lenin 1963a, pp. 231–46, emphasis in the original.
between the Anglo-Saxon world and the European continent consisted in the fact that the political development of the latter took place under the flag of the French Revolution which commenced in 1789, whereas the bourgeois revolution in England was completed in 1688, that is, more than a whole century in advance. The bourgeois revolution in England was thus accomplished under less highly developed conditions, and could bring in its train no such a tremendous upheaval in the material and spiritual life of society as the French Revolution. The subsequent political advances made by the rising classes in England since 1688 usually took the form of isolated struggles for one particular object. The revolutionary classes were far more intent than the continentals in their actions, but held aloof from revolutionary ideas. Their aims concerned, not society as a whole, but only single issues. The revolutionary classes of the European continent, whose ideas were influenced by the French Revolution, were, on the contrary, far more prone to consider society as a totality and thus to strive to change it as a whole. Consequently, they were more ready than the English to look to the struggle for political rights as a means of attaining the social revolution.

In continental Europe, Kautsky continued, the political organisation of the proletariat – a mass party with a Marxist programme – had developed before the trade-union organisations; whereas, in the Anglo Saxon countries (in England after the decline of Chartism), the whole attention of the working masses was centred on the trade-union movement, and a separate political party seemed quite superfluous since no obstacle hindered their political activity. Under these conditions, it was only possible to form a separate mass working-class party by amalgamating the trade unions into a common political organisation, as a transitional stage towards the creation of a revolutionary workers’ party with a definite Marxist programme. Kautsky hoped that the American Federation of Labor would be able to fulfil that role in the United States.93

From revolutionary Marxism to centrisn

In his extraordinarily insightful 1906 booklet *Results and Prospects*, Leon Trotsky wrote:

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The function of the socialist parties was and is to revolutionize the consciousness of the working class, just as the development of capitalism revolutionized social relations. But the work of agitation and organization among the ranks of the proletariat has an internal inertia. The European Socialist Parties, particularly the largest of them, the German Social-Democratic Party, have developed their conservatism in proportion as the great masses have embraced socialism and the more these masses have become organized and disciplined. As a consequence of this, Social Democracy as an organization embodying the political experience of the proletariat may at a certain moment become a direct obstacle to the open conflict between the workers and bourgeois reaction. In other words, the propagandist-socialist conservatism of the proletarian parties may at a certain moment hold back the direct struggle of the proletariat for power.  

Unfortunately, that prophecy proved to be correct and was incarnated, so to speak, in the person of the old Kautsky. 

Kautsky’s polemic with the union bureaucrats in November 1909 over Gompers’s tour of Europe was the last flare of the fire that the 1905 Russian Revolution had kindled in him. He had warned against the growing bureaucratisation of the party apparatus as far back as the September 1906 Mannheim Congress of the SPD. In a letter to Hugo Haase dated 14 February 1909, and written against the background of the SPD executive’s opposition to the publication of his book The Road to Power, Kautsky wrote:

What most depresses me of the entire affair is the weakness of August [Bebel], which should surely be attributed to his poor health. He even upbraided me for my review of Cunow’s book in Vorwärts, which he considered too revolutionary! The word revolution seems to cause him direct physical discomfort. In his obituary of Natalie Liebknecht he speaks about the ‘years of the movement’ rather than the ‘revolutionary years’. The situation today is such, that the most powerful Social-Democratic party of the world has the most servile executive of the world. August has lost all

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94 Trotsky 1906, Chapter 9 (Marxist Internet Archive edition).
95 Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands 1906, p. 257. (A partial English translation is available at the MIA as ‘On Socialism and Trade Unionism’ [November 1906]).
strength, and during the last years he was the only politician with broad views among us. Singer has good instincts and works excellently with Bebel, but without him and even more against him he is not in a position to put in motion the indolent mass.\footnote{Reproduced in Ratz 1967, pp. 432–77.}

Both leaders died shortly afterwards: Paul Singer in 1911 and Bebel in 1913.

In a letter to Victor Adler dated 26 September 1909, Kautsky further revealed his pessimism at what he called the ‘Überwuchern des Bürokratismus’ that, beginning in the unions, had now extended to the party, and by turning its functionaries into mere administrators of a huge apparatus, killed in its cradle every bold initiative. Kautsky placed all his hopes on mass action that would infuse once again the necessary impetus and enthusiasm into the inert body of the trade-union and party bureaucracy.\footnote{Adler (ed.) 1954, pp. 500–2.} In fact, the next few years would witness the growing stranglehold of the reformist bureaucracy over the unions and the SPD. On the eve of the First World War, control of the party executive had effectively passed into the hands of Friedrich Ebert, who later came to be known as ‘the Stalin of social democracy’.

Kautsky’s own decline set in a few months later, when he began to accommodate to the reformist pressures of the labour bureaucracy and aristocracy. In 1909, he had written in the last chapter of \textit{The Road to Power}, called ‘A New Century of Revolutions’:

\begin{quote}
The immediate task of the proletariat in Germany is to strive energetically for democracy in the Empire as well as in the different states, notably Prussia and Saxony. From an international point of view, its most pressing task is the struggle against imperialism and militarism. No less evident that the task itself are the means at our disposal for carrying it out. To those employed so far should be added the \textit{general strike}, which we have adopted theoretically since the beginning of the 1890s and whose efficacy under favourable circumstances has been proved several times.\footnote{Kautsky 1972, p. 110, emphasis in the original.}
\end{quote}

Yet, a year later, he refused to publish in the pages of \textit{Die Neue Zeit} an article by Luxemburg calling for the use of the general strike in order to achieve universal suffrage in Prussia, and raising the slogan of the republic as a transitional demand in order to turn the issue of electoral reform into a channel
for revolutionary action.\textsuperscript{100} This resulted in a break of personal relations with Luxemburg and, a year later, with Mehring (who was removed form the editorial board of \textit{Die Neue Zeit} in 1912), as well as in a series of polemics in the columns of \textit{Die Neue Zeit} with Luxemburg, Radek, Pannekoek and Lensch, which marked the beginning of the separation between the centre and the left wing of the SPD and the Second International.

In the course of this debate, Kautsky assumed the role of leading theoretician of the SPD centrist and developed his infamous ‘attrition strategy’ \textit{[Ermattungsstrategie] of struggle against capitalism. Ironically, the former leader of the struggle against revisionism, which began with an article against Bernstein by the maverick British left-wing socialist Belfort Bax called ‘Our German Fabian Convert’, now found himself delivering long tirades recommending the emulation of the strategy of Fabius Cunctator.\textsuperscript{101} When, in the course of the polemic, Kautsky significantly began to refer to the members of the revolutionary left wing of the SPD as ‘our Russians’, Luxemburg called his attention to the fact that a few years earlier he too had been called ‘a Russian’ and a preacher of ‘revolutionary romanticism’, and that his present politics were ‘nothing but parliamentarism’.\textsuperscript{102}

As regards the central question of modern politics, imperialism, Kautsky now began to argue that the conflict of interest among the imperialist powers was not an economic necessity, and to defend the delusional policy of fighting the arms race through the advocacy of international agreements to limit armaments in the framework of imperialist society.\textsuperscript{103} As Radek put it, Kautsky was forced to revise his earlier theory that militarism was an inevitable outgrowth of imperialism, not because imperialism had changed its nature, but because his Fabian strategy of ‘wearing out the enemy’ could not be sustained by his former analysis.\textsuperscript{104}

At the outbreak of the controversy between the left and centre factions of the SPD, most of the Russian revolutionary leaders failed to take Luxemburg’s side. In July 1910, Trotsky wrote to Kautsky that no one in the Russian party,

\textsuperscript{100} Luxemburg 1972g, pp. 148–59.
\textsuperscript{101} Kautsky 1910c; Luxemburg 1972c; Kautsky 1910d; Luxemburg 1972e.
\textsuperscript{102} Kautsky 1913; Luxemburg 1973.
\textsuperscript{104} Radek, ‘Unser Kampf gegen den Imperialismus’ (\textit{Die Neue Zeit}, May 1912) and ‘Wege und Mittel im Kampfe gegen den Imperialismus’ (\textit{Bremer Bürger-Zeitung}, 1912), in Radek 1921a, pp. 156–207. Radek was following Luxemburg’s lead: see Kautsky 1911c and Luxemburg 1972f.
'not even among the Bolsheviks', dared to side with Luxemburg, and that he admired her ‘noble impatience’ but considered it absurd ‘to raise it to a leading principle for the party’. The most insightful comment was Parvus’s, who pointed out to Kautsky that ‘the whole affair is an amusingly faithful copy of the discussion between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks before the Russian Revolution’. But Lenin had a number of theoretical divergences with Luxemburg and her Polish organisation (on the national question and organisational issues, as well as on her criticism of Marx’s expanded reproduction schemes, on which she based her theory of imperialism), and, above all, was much less acquainted with the SPD’s advanced state of bureaucratisation. His first serious clashes with the centrist leadership of the Second International came in 1912 over Russian affairs, when Lenin opposed the unification initiatives of the ISB after the definitive scission between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. A meeting was finally held in Brussels in July 1914, at which the Bolsheviks rejected all unprincipled prospects of unity between the two politically irreconcilable trends. But, as far as German and international politics were concerned, Lenin continued to consider himself a faithful disciple of Kautsky right up to the outbreak of the First World War.

When the SPD betrayed the most elementary principles of proletarian internationalism and the traditional slogan that had always formed the basis of its agitation (‘to this system, not one man and not one penny’), by voting for war credits in the Reichstag on 4 August 1914, Lenin drastically reversed his position and recognised the correctness of Luxemburg’s criticism of Kautsky’s centrism. In the section of his major work *The State and Revolution* dealing with Kautsky’s controversy with Pannekoek on the mass political strike Lenin wrote:

> In opposing Kautsky, Pannekoek came out as one of the representatives of the ‘Left radical’ trend which included Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Radek, and others. Advocating revolutionary tactics, they were united in the conviction

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110 Lenin 1963c; 1963d. See also Haupt 1966.
that Kautsky was going over to the ‘Centre,’ which wavered in an unprincipled manner between Marxism and opportunism. This view was proved perfectly correct by the war, when this ‘Centrist’ (wrongly called Marxist) trend, or Kautskyism, revealed itself in all its repulsive wretchedness.112

**Bolshevism and the democratic counterrevolution**

The First World War eventually led to the outbreak of a new revolution in Russia in February 1917, whose actual course did not fit with the traditional schemata of Bolshevism. Though the revolution was accomplished by a union of the workers and peasants, it did not lead to the establishment of a ‘democratic dictatorship’ but to a régime of dual power in which a bourgeois government was confronted with the not yet fully realised sovereignty of workers’ and soldiers’ soviets led by the Social Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks. Lenin accordingly rearmed the party with his 1917 ‘April Theses’, setting before it the perspective of seizing power and establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat in the immediate future – as Trotsky, then an exile in the United States, demanded from far-away New York. After this virtual endorsement of the theory of permanent revolution by Lenin, Trotsky and the other members of the Inter-District organisation joined the Bolshevik Party and played a leading role in the October Revolution.

The ‘pacifist’ phrases of the white-supremacist American President Woodrow Wilson in early 1917 found ardent supporters in Kautsky and the other leaders of the German social democracy’s ‘centre’ faction, Hugo Haase and George Ledebour,113 who, in fact, pioneered the post-World War I role of European social democracy as ‘the political agency of American capitalism’.114 Confronted with the Bolshevik Revolution, Kautsky renounced his former views and, condemning the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly by the soviets, bowed to the fetishes of bourgeois parliamentarism and joined the camp of the democratic counterrevolution sponsored by imperialism. Kautsky’s closest companion-in-arms in the USPD (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands: Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany) was Eduard Bernstein, who had never renounced his revisionist views.

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112 For a selection of documents from this debate see Grunenberg (ed.) 1970.
113 Luxemburg 1974.
114 Trotsky 1971a, p. 23.
Kautsky wrote three books in defence of the democratic counterrevolution, the first two of which were answered by Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin’s *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918) was a reply to Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1918), and Trotsky’s *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (1920) was written in response to Kautsky’s *Terrorism and Communism: A Contribution to the Natural History of Revolution* (1919). In 1921, Kautsky wrote a third book against the Bolshevik Revolution *From Democracy to State Slavery: A Discussion with Trotsky*, which was never translated to English. In his 1922 brochure, *The Paths of the Russian Revolution*, Radek quoted lengthy portions from Kautsky’s 1907 study ‘The Driving Forces of the Russian Revolution and Its Prospects’, showing that they flatly contradicted his later assertions that the Russian Revolution should have limited itself to carrying out purely bourgeois tasks, adding:

This honest fellow here seeks to create the impression that he had been a Menshevik, so to speak, from birth. But as the quotations above show, he was not only solidly with the Bolsheviks on the decisive question of the understanding of the role of the bourgeoisie in the Russian Revolution, but where he departed from the Bolsheviks he went even further than they did by estimating as possible the passing over of the Russian Revolution to a direct struggle for Socialism. The respected Karl Kautsky can plead in his defence that his present ideas are the echo of Martov’s, and that in 1905–6 he had echoed Rosa Luxemburg. Kautsky’s arguments of 1906 were the reflection of a tendency which had its representatives as the time of the first revolution in Trotsky, Parvus and Rosa Luxemburg, a tendency which, as we have said, we outside both of the factions of Russian Social Democracy. The representatives of this tendency pointed out that even if the peasantry represented a great revolutionary force which the working class must by all means attempt to develop and on whom it had to rely, it was not capable of carrying out an independent policy because of its social atomization, its dispersion, and the low level of its development. Whereas Lenin and the Bolsheviks talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry, the above-mentioned Marxists laid down the formula of the dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry.116

115 Kautsky 1921b.
116 Radek 1999, emphasis in the original.
In his no less brilliant 1919 work *Proletarian Dictatorship and Terrorism*, Radek accurately captured the revolutionaries’ view of Kautsky at that time: ‘While long rows of priests with swinging censers march in front of Kolchak’s troops, and endeavour to break the courage of the peasants in the Red Army by holding aloft sacred images, Karl Kautsky holds up to the view of the proletariat of Russia and of Europe a picture of wonder-working democracy in one hand and a terrible picture of proletarian despotism in the other’.\(^{117}\) Evidently, Radek concluded, Kautsky had never assimilated the lessons of the 1871 Paris Commune, which was also an insurrection against the result of universal suffrage in France, since the National Assembly elected after the fall of Louis Napoleon included 400 Monarchists and 200 Republicans. The democratic counterrevolution would later be repeatedly employed by the bourgeoisie to confuse the revolutionary workers’ leadership, for instance the inexperienced cadres of the Fourth International during the revolutionary period that opened up in Western Europe immediately after the Second World War.\(^{118}\)

But Kautsky’s inglorious ending in no way detracts from the value of the writings of his revolutionary period, of which ‘The American Worker’ is an outstanding example. As Trotsky wrote in his obituary: ‘We remember Kautsky as our former teacher to whom we once owed a great deal, but who separated himself from the proletarian revolution and from whom, consequently, we had to separate ourselves’.\(^{119}\)

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\(^{118}\) See Bornstein and Richardson 1986, pp. 160–208.

\(^{119}\) Trotsky 1973b, pp. 98–9.


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Karl Kautsky’s 1906 essay ‘The American Worker’, published in English translation for the first time in this issue of *Historical Materialism*, provides rich insights into the actual history and struggles of the working-class majority of the United States. Readers should engage directly with that essay – the primary purpose of the present article is not to summarise and explicate what readers can easily find on their own in Kautsky’s discussion.

Our purpose here is to fit what Kautsky writes into a larger context. Specifically, we will explore the way in which a variety of thinkers and activists, operating within the Marxist tradition for well over a century and a half, have wrestled with the question posed by Werner Sombart: why is there no socialism in the United States? Of course, Kautsky and the others sought to do more than that. They also struggled to comprehend the nature of capitalism in the United States, the peculiarities of the US working class, the specific dynamics of American history. And, as is appropriate with Marxists, this was always within the context of seeing how socialism might be advanced, in ‘the New World’, in Europe, and globally. In a sense, we will be tracing a fluctuating but definite
pattern in the evolution of analyses – from simplicity to complexity. Interwoven in this are shifting patterns of optimism and pessimism regarding the straightforwardness – or, even, the possibility – of building a working-class movement capable of bringing a transition to socialism in the United States.

Sombart himself focused on what ex-Marxist economic historian Louis M. Hacker termed ‘the triumph of American capitalism’, and we will want to explore ways in which this recurring and self-renewing triumph has impacted on various analysts. 1 Actually, there are two counterposed strains of ‘simplicity’, and both operate from an assumption of inevitability (elements of each can be teased out of the early Sombart): the inevitability of capitalist durability versus the inevitability of socialist revolution in the United States.

We will see that, within the Marxist tradition (and within Kautsky himself), there was a tension between an activist and a fatalist dynamic, the former lending itself to greater sensitivity of complexities and openness to possibilities, the latter closing off possibilities and reducing reality to much more simple propositions (in a manner consistent with either a dogmatic optimism or pessimism).

Actually, within Marx himself (and, to a somewhat lesser extent, in his co-thinker Engels and his talented daughter Eleanor) we find a methodological approach that facilitates greater openness to complex and contradictory realities – with the result that we find fresh observations and flashes of insight regarding realities in the United States.

Such qualities were less apt to come into play as Marx’s thought became congealed into a simpler theoretical orthodoxy providing an ideological orientation for a mass movement in the international working class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Essential elements of ‘open Marxism’ tended to endure particularly among some of the more revolutionary theorists of international socialism. Kautsky himself, as he tilted toward the revolutionary dynamic in Marxism, was able to contribute useful elements (although not a rounded and fully coherent analysis) that remain useful today in studying the history and complexities of the US working class, and were not surpassed – or even approached – by US co-thinkers employing the more standard (and fatalistic) version of ‘scientific socialism’.

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1 See the introduction and conclusion of Louis M. Hacker’s classic *The Triumph of American Capitalism* (1941), and Paul Sweezy’s perceptive review, Sweezy 1953a, for striking examples of disillusioned ex-socialist and optimistic persistent socialist.
But the simple and optimistic assumptions of earlier socialists could not withstand the blows of ‘life itself’. The upward trajectory of working-class radicalism in the United States was reversed by World War I and the expansive capitalism of the 1920s. The resurgent labour militancy during the Great Depression of the 1930s, instead of generating the long-anticipated mass labour party and mass socialist consciousness, flowed into the ‘New-Deal’ pro-capitalist liberal-reform coalition of Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Since this seemed so divergent from European experience, efforts to define what made the United States so ‘exceptional’ (and what was the meaning of this ‘exceptionalism’) proliferated among stalwart Marxists and disillusioned ex-Marxists – sometimes in ways that pushed in the direction of simplifying certainties, but sometimes in ways that added new insights and elements to an increasingly complex analysis. Additional lines of thought opened up with the awareness that US experience might not be an exception to but instead a precursor of European (and global capitalist) developments. Consistent with present-day trends of ‘globalisation’, such lines of analysis include optimistic and pessimistic notions of what the future might bring.

The fatalist/activist dichotomy also emerges among US Marxists in the post-World War II period, with divergent ways of understanding distinctive aspects of the notion embedded in Marx and explicitly stated by his daughter – the existence of a ‘latent socialism’ in capitalist America. This exists not only in the realities of capitalist society but in the consciousness (or, more accurately, in the sub-consciousness) of working-class sectors who experience oppression and exploitation in that society on a daily basis – examining the development of the labour process being one key, but also examining the dynamics of popular culture.

This can either nurture a sense of socialist inevitability, of course, or it can generate an intensified activism in order to help actualise socialist possibilities. The notion of a latent working-class socialism can also be given a twist that calls for the subordination of divergent and ‘diversionary’ identities to class identity – a reversion to simplicity that (we will see) can slide into a variant of labour conservatism. It can also be approached within the ‘complexity’ framework: giving attention to the ways in which ‘latent socialism’ can be drawn out of the dynamically interpenetrating identities of class, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and so on.

In any event, it seems likely that the persistence of capitalism will continue to sustain socialist commitments. It is noteworthy that Marxists in the early
years of the twenty-first century should be reflecting over the work of Karl Kautsky, of all people. Here, too, there is more than one approach.

The orthodox Marxist who rejected Eduard Bernstein’s reformist myopia – the new interpretation stresses – also rejected the destructive brutality of Lenin’s Bolshevism. Subjecting the un-Marxist and undemocratic perniciousness of ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ in Soviet Russia to critique, he also predicted the ‘ultra-imperialism’ that would characterise the global economy later in the century. He preserved a serious-minded Marxism that future generations would have to find their way back to, given the historically demonstrated inadequacies of those to his right and to his left. It would make a considerable amount of sense, therefore, to turn our attention to the long-forgotten essay, ‘The American Worker’, that Kautsky penned almost a century ago, even if it is time that we move beyond the orthodoxies that animated its author.²

This elegant reinterpretation has never quite erased the image of ‘the renegade Kautsky’. His revolutionary rhetoric and theoretical ‘orthodoxy’ during the glory days of the pre-1914 Second International masked the reformist corruption and impending collapse of social democracy in the face of an ascendant imperialism. Then came the murderous explosion of the World War, and the embrace of the Kaiser’s war effort by Germany’s socialist majority. Kautsky distinguished himself with a stoic acceptance of the imperialist slaughter – only slightly modified by a belated and modest anti-war dissent. This pretentious ‘pope of Marxism’ shook his finger at real revolutionaries (his martyred friend Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky), while clinging to a bureaucratised section of the labour movement that accommodated itself to the capitalist order. What can one expect from an old article by such a sorry figure? Some might answer: even Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg had thought highly of Kautsky in his earlier years.³

We owe it to Kautsky and to ourselves, however, to move beyond intellectual and political fashions – to confront the essay itself, and to understand its several contexts. One context has to do with the historical and sociological realities that Kautsky was writing about. Another has to do with the intellectual and political terrain of the socialist movement in 1906. Yet another context

² Scholarly contributions to this view of Kautsky include Salvadori 1979, Steenson 1978, Geary 1987, Donald 1993.
has to do with the tangled tradition of trying to explain ‘why there is no socialism in the United States’.

There is no single, clever answer. Reality is too complex for that – this reality in particular. Kautsky certainly did not answer the question but, instead, made his own contribution to the cumulative process of trying to work out what brought socialism closer and what pushed it further away on the American scene. What we will want to look for is what John Rees has described:

Society is taken to be in a process of constant change. Such change involves the totality of relations – economic, political, ideological, and cultural – of which the society is composed. This process of total change is a result of internal contradictions, manifested as class antagonism, which reconstitute society anew by both transforming and renewing the forces that first gave rise to the initial contradiction.⁴

Just as it is impossible, in a sense, to place your foot in the same river twice (since the water your foot went into the first time has flowed far downstream by the time you step in again), so is the US working class in a dynamic state of flux. It is a different entity when Marx looks at it in the 1840s and again in the 1870s, when Engels engages with it in the 1890s, when Kautsky turns his attention to it 1906, when Lukács and Gramsci discuss it in the 1920s, when Trotsky cheers it on in the 1930s, when Herbert Marcuse dismisses it in the early 1960s, and so on. At the same time, there are similarities and patterns, continuities, and an evolution within a definite (although contradictory, complex, dynamically evolving) social and economic context.

**Triumphant capitalism**

Kautsky’s essay was a critical review, first of all, of an important study by German sociologist Werner Sombart, a prestigious student of Max Weber and an academic sympathiser of Germany’s socialist labour movement. Sombart’s work of 1905–6, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* sought to demonstrate why a socialist movement had failed to assume the mass proportions and political influence in America that it was attaining throughout Europe. True, Sombart predicted that the US socialists would soon catch up with their European comrades, and he promised a future study

that would explain the reasons why. But the future study never appeared, and the future itself mocked the sociologist’s prophecy.\(^5\)

Sombart’s analysis of socialism’s failure on American soil consequently became one in a long succession of explanations of the absence of American socialism. Such explanations have been produced, first of all, by such disappointed socialists as Selig Perlman and Daniel Bell. Often, these explanations show the influence of their authors’ particular understandings of the Marxist method – involving a ‘scientific’ concern for ‘objective’ factors, shaping a deterministic outlook that dictated submission to the inevitabilities of History.

In Sombart, who was not assuming any predestined outcome, we find something better than that. He developed a searching and subtle analysis of political peculiarities having to do with the nature of political parties and of the state in this crudely democratic republic. He discussed, somewhat speculatively but intelligently, the impact of these peculiarities on working-class consciousness. He also sought the roots of the political peculiarities in the deeper peculiarities of American capitalism, and he reflected on how the economic factors – that provided relative prosperity (‘roast beef and apple pie’) – cut across the radicalisation of the US proletariat.

While by no means rejecting such considerations, pioneering labour historian Selig Perlman emphasized other factors in his classic *Theory of the Labor Movement*. As a Marxist in the first decades of the twentieth century, he had considered revolution to be inevitable because capitalist society’s majority class, the working class, was necessarily revolutionary thanks to the dynamics of capitalism as explained by Karl Marx. But, by the conservative and prosperous 1920s, Perlman had turned this proposition on its head. The dynamics of capitalism inevitably foster among workers an *organic job consciousness*, culminating not in socialist consciousness but in ‘pure-and-simple’ trade unionism as represented by the American Federation of Labor under ex-socialist Samuel Gompers. While left-wing intellectuals want the workers to focus on the goal of proletarian revolution, real workers naturally prefer a capitalist economy in which they can seek guarantees of a job with improved wages, hours and working conditions.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Sombart 1976. There is no indication in this text that Sombart would soon become disillusioned with socialism and in later years adapt to the rising tide of Nazism.

\(^6\) Perlman 1928. This perspective shapes much of what can be found in the first substantial history of US labour of which Perlman was a central author – Commons et al. 1918–35.
Embracing both Sombart and Perlman, socialist-turned-sociologist Daniel Bell added his own updated scholarship and humorous insights, capped with a philosophical flourish. US socialism ‘was trapped by the unhappy problem of living “in but not of the world,” so it could only act, and then inadequately, as the moral, but not political, man in immoral society’. Bell added that ‘it could never resolve but only straddle the basic issue of either accepting capitalist society, and seeking to transform it from within as the labor movement did, or becoming the sworn enemy of that society like the communists’. Of course, the enhanced political and economic opportunities of America ‘made a barren ground for a socialist movement’, especially because Debsian Socialists as well as Communist militants were hampered by the ‘ideological blinkers’ of Marxism. But Bell consistently re-emphasised the assertion of Sombart’s great teacher, Max Weber, that ‘he who seeks the salvation of souls, his own as well as others, should not seek it along the avenue of politics’.

This approach became associated in the 1950s and early 1960s with the ‘end of ideology’ current in intellectual life represented by Bell, Louis Hartz, Seymour Martin Lipset, Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, Lewis Feuer, and other ex-leftists who gravitated to Cold-War liberalism (and, finally, in some cases, to neoconservatism).

Some left-wing intellectuals were by no means inclined to abandon ‘ideology’ (i.e. Marxism) yet also viewed capitalism as being even more triumphant, materially and ideologically, than those to their right would allow. Most prominent among these was Herbert Marcuse. By the early 1960s, Marcuse was suggesting that ‘advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future,’ making ‘technology and science its own . . . for the ever-more-effective domination of man and nature, for the ever-more-effective utilization of its resources’. In sum: ‘Domination – in the guise of affluence and liberty – extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives’.

James Boggs came up with a similar theorisation from his own experience in the late 1950s and early 1960s as a radical black autoworker from Detroit: ‘The sons of the factory workers and coal miners have become teachers, engineers, draftsmen, scientists, social workers. . . . The working class is growing, as Marx predicted, but it is not the old working class which the

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8 See Waxman 1968.
radicals persist in believing will create the revolution and establish control over production. That old working class is a vanishing herd.”

Elaborating on this, Marxist economist Paul Sweezy noted that, within such an increasingly differentiated proletariat, ‘occupational and status consciousness has tended to submerge class consciousness’, that the working class as a whole becomes a ‘non-revolutionary majority’. Sweezy tentatively suggested an historical generalisation that would challenge a central Marxist tenet: ‘If the early opportunities of the early period of modern industry are missed, the proletariat of an industrializing country tends to become less and less revolutionary.’ Sweezy, Boggs, and Marcuse argued that certain elements – a majority of African-Americans in the United States, and the oppressed labourers of the ‘Third World’ of Asia, Africa and Latin America – still constituted a revolutionary force with the potential to overthrow capitalism.

But possibilities for revolutionary socialists in the US would be limited if the working class under ‘mature’ capitalism is necessarily non-revolutionary. While building on elements of Marxist analysis, the analytic-strategic conclusions reached by Marcuse and others represented a dead-end for Marxism as such. A more open Marxism – free from both optimistic and pessimistic varieties of fatalism, and from both radical and de-radicalised notions of what workers will ‘inevitably’ decide – is necessary for comprehending the development of capital and labour in the United States. This open Marxism is consistent with the revolutionary-activist current one can find in the work of Antonio Gramsci and of Georg Lukács from 1919 to 1929, as well as the contributions of Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky. And Kautsky’s 1906 perspective can be identified with that tradition as well.

**From revolutionary activism to evolutionary fatalism**

Both Daniel Gaido (in this issue of *Historical Materialism*) and Moira Donald have documented that, at the very time when his ‘American Worker’ essay appeared, Kautsky’s Marxism was most consistent with the orientation dominating the revolutionary wing of international socialism. From 1905 to 1909, Kautsky’s thinking converged with that of Trotsky, Luxemburg and

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10 Boggs 1963, pp. 15–16.
11 Sweezy 1972, pp. 160–1, 165. Later, resurgent struggles among sectors of the working classes of various industrialised countries caused Sweezy and others to shift back to a more positive view of their revolutionary potential.
Lenin. An indication of this was that he shared their views on the dynamics of the Russian revolutionary struggle, which were in sharp contrast to the more ‘orthodox’ but dogmatic-fatalist emphasis of such Menshevik leaders as Plekhanov, Martov and Dan that Russia’s upcoming ‘bourgeois-democratic’ revolution required a worker-capitalist alliance to overthrow Tsarist absolutism.\(^\text{12}\)

Kautsky’s radicalism reached a crescendo with his *The Road to Power* (1909), where he thundered against class-collaborationism: ‘To want the Social Democratic Party to link itself with bourgeois parties through an alliance policy now, at the very time when those parties have prostituted and utterly compromised themselves; to want the Party to link itself with them in order to further that very prostitution – that is to demand that it commit moral suicide’. Challenging the deepening reformism of the trade-union bureaucracy and of those party leaders who sought gains through ‘selling [the party’s] strength to a bourgeois government’, Kautsky insisted on a radically different vision:

> The vanguard of the proletariat today forms the strongest, the most far-sighted, most selfless, boldest stratum, and the one united in the largest free organizations, of the nations with European civilization. And the proletariat will, in and through struggle, take up into itself the unselfish and far-sighted elements of all classes; it will organize and educate in its own bosom even its most backward elements and fill them with understanding and the joy of hope. It will place its vanguard at the head of civilization and make it capable of guiding the immense economic transformation that will finally, over the entire globe, put an end to all the misery arising out of subjection, exploitation, and ignorance.\(^\text{13}\)

But, when Rosa Luxemburg pressed the struggle against the non-revolutionary standpoint of the social-democratic leadership even more sharply, to the extreme displeasure of the Party and trade-union apparatus, Kautsky finally chose to back off. In 1910, he turned his polemical guns against Luxemburg. Contrasting the ‘strategy of attrition’ (patiently struggling for reforms) to the ‘strategy of overthrow’ (revolution), and promising that the first strategy in the near future ‘must go over’ to the second (probably – he suggested optimistically – ‘in the next Reichstag elections’), he warned Luxemburg that

\(^{\text{12}}\) Donald 1993, pp. 91–3, 111–13.

\(^{\text{13}}\) Kautsky 1996, pp. 90–1. Translator Raymond Meyer uses the word ‘élite’ where I have substituted ‘vanguard’.
one must not ‘be carried away by impatience into premature actions and fire our last rounds in the opening skirmish’.\textsuperscript{14}

Each in his own way, Lenin and Trotsky were inclined to align themselves with the prestigious Kautsky rather than Luxemburg in this debate, but the Mensheviks viewed the whole thing as a vindication of their own fatalistic ‘orthodoxy’. Moira Donald notes that ‘Trotsky and Riazanov both informed Kautsky that the Mensheviks welcomed his stand as evidence that he was drawing closer to Menshevism. Riazanov explained that the Mensheviks wanted to prove that Kautsky was “a real Menshevik and Rosa a Bolshevik”’. While Kautsky initially held back from endorsing this view, his reluctant acceptance of the First World War in 1914 and rejection of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 brought him into an alignment with the Mensheviks, and he accepted the linkage of Luxemburg with the Bolshevism that he had come to abhor.\textsuperscript{15}

This political evolution brought to the fore fatalistic elements in his Marxism. In \textit{The Materialist Conception of History} (1927), he connected the notion that ‘the advance and progress of the proletariat is irresistible’ with the conviction that ‘evolution advances to ever-higher forms,’ that ‘the special laws of the development of society . . . do not contradict the laws of natural evolution, but form . . . their natural extension’, in a manner operating ‘independently of men’s volition and knowledge’. Hence: ‘We must count on the advance and ultimate victory of the non-European proletariat as much as on that of the European one (in which are also to be included the North American and Australian). Here as well as there, this process will take place on the basis of the same laws of industrial capital, which is more and more taking hold of the whole world’.\textsuperscript{16}

Such fatalistic elements can certainly be found in Kautsky’s earlier works, and in the Marxism of the Second International, influencing – as we have noted – subsequent Marxist theorists of the late twentieth century. ‘The scientism and positivism which characterized Kautsky’s interpretation of Marx’s writings was,’ notes sympathetic critic Dick Geary, ‘part and parcel of a widespread \textit{Weltanschauung} in nineteenth-century Europe, which looked to the natural sciences for a model . . . of human history’. At certain points, Geary points out, Kautsky rejected a fatalistic interpretation of Marxism, but

\textsuperscript{14} Kautsky 1983, pp. 72–3.
\textsuperscript{15} Donald 1993, pp. 169, 249–56; Le Blanc 1999, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{16} Kautsky 1988, pp. 410, 412–13, 522.
‘when confronted by any specific tactical question the SPD’s leading theorist produced innumerable arguments to justify inaction. The proletariat invariably had to wait upon the laws of capitalist development’. Geary adds that, at such points, Kautsky’s ‘Marxism was not, as it was for Lenin, “a guide to action” but rather a recipe for “inaction”’. But, in Kautsky’s most interesting and revolutionary period, the period in which ‘The American Worker’ appeared, a different and more open quality comes to the fore.

**Open Marxism and American realities**

‘The overall vulgarization of Marxism’, according to Antonio Gramsci, has generally taken the form of ‘deterministic, mechanistic, fatalistic elements’. We have seen that such determinism also left its marks on disillusioned ex-Marxists and even (at moments) on critical Marxists who are inclined to be neither vulgar nor mechanistic. To hold that one or another aspect of capitalist development inevitably assigns to the mass of working-class individuals any specific consciousness (whether revolutionary or non-revolutionary) is problematic. ‘We should, I think, prepare a funeral elegy on the concept of fatalism,’ Gramsci concluded, ‘praising its usefulness in a certain historical period but burying it once for all – with full honours’. Gramsci, like his contemporary Georg Lukács, saw future possibilities as being conditioned by ‘objective’ economic and social realities. But the thought of these Hegelian Leninists was also alive to multiple possibilities – grounded in the understanding that not only are ‘objective’ factors too complex and fluid to be fully grasped in analysis, but that the consciousness and actions of human beings (especially when informed by revolutionary theory and focused through effective organisation) can alter the ‘objective’ factors.

Marx’s thought was similarly animated by a passionate and critical-minded optimism – engaged with and shaped by a multiplicity of new realities generated by the democratic and industrial revolutions that were explosively impacting on his world. He was by no means constructing a parochial and fatalistic dogmatism, but rather a critical analysis open to the experience of global developments.

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This openness is especially evident in the way he approaches, both in his earliest years as well as in the twilight of his life, the analyses of realities in the United States.

‘Socialism and communism did not originate in Germany,’ he commented in 1847, ‘but in England, France, and North America’. Of course, these earlier variants of ‘socialism and communism’ were not the same thing as Marx’s ‘scientific socialism,’ but they were among the vital intellectual building-blocks of his perspective. There were several elements in this distinctively American contribution. One element had to do with the deepening of class oppression that was part of the growing industrial capitalist order. Another element involved the growth of a working-class political movement that had profoundly radical implications. A third element was related to the rise – within this context – of transcendentalist, radical-democratic, and utopian-socialist currents.19

Drawing on perceptive studies of US realities by Alexis de Tocqueville, Gustav de Beaumont, and especially Thomas Hamilton, Marx in the early 1840s grappled with the collisions of capitalist industrialisation and a democratising political order, out of which a working-class radicalisation seemed to be arising. As Maximilien Rubel has commented, ‘in becoming an economist, Marx will give to Thomas Hamilton’s premonitory warnings [about how the clash of capitalist industrialisation with democratic ferment could lead to working-class socialism] the theoretical coating in the famous chapter of Capital entitled “Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation”’.20

Marx was also alert to countervailing tendencies in the United States that blocked the realisation of the revolutionary-socialist scenario. Drawing together the different strands of Marx’s thought from the 1840s through the 1850s suggests this analysis: the radicalism inherent in the early working-class movement of capitalist America had little hope of being triumphant as long

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19 This convergence of factors in the 1820s through 1840s is capably identified in Feuer 1969, pp. 164–215. For valuable reflections on the radicalism of the transcendentalists, see Frothingham 1959, Matthiessen 1941, pp. 3–175, and Herreshoff 1973 pp. 11–30. A useful survey of utopian socialist communities is offered by Hillquit 1910, pp. 23–131, and a later study by Lloyd D. Easton, 1992, pp. 9–23, which argues persuasively that some of them were more substantial and successful than is often assumed. Rich details on the early Workingmen’s Parties and other forms of labour radicalism in the United States of this time are to be found in Pessen 1967 and Wilentz 1986.

as slavery continued to exist and as long as the ‘safety-valve’ of Western lands remained available. With the end of slavery (1865) and with a forty-year population growth and westward expansion (concluded by the 1880s), an upsurge of labour radicalism could be expected to alter the political landscape, placing socialism on the agenda.²¹

Marx himself was never able to observe American realities first-hand, and he died before this forty-year deadline had passed. But a speaking tour of the United States by Marx’s daughter several years after his death generated impressions and evidence that seemed to justify his optimistic forecast. In 1886–7, many Americans had a half-formed set of perceptions, inclinations, hopes and values that added up, in the opinion of Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, to a sort of ‘unconscious socialism’. In the United States of the 1880s, the two visitors discovered scores of working-class and pro-labour newspapers, reflecting vital working-class and radical-democratic subcultures.²²

Eleanor and her companion saw insurgent working-class, oppositional, and dissident elements of the United States as the 1880s were fading into the 1890s. A formidable proletarian challenge to the bourgeois status quo would – they were certain – soon be generated by the still-mushrooming Knights of Labor, the then-radical American Federation of Labor, the militant struggles for an eight-hour working day, the widespread labour party efforts, and the growing clusters of organised socialists. Of course, what Marx and Aveling wrote about the United States could not be more than the vivid impressions gained from a brief tour. The reality was far more dynamic than even these perceptive observers could see.

Marx and Engels had commented in the Communist Manifesto of 1848 that capitalism involves the ‘constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation,’ in which – over and over again – it seems that ‘all that is solid melts into air’. The United States, which, by 1890, would be the world’s foremost manufacturing nation, was undergoing remarkable changes fundamentally altering the realities which these insightful optimists sought to describe. ‘The

²¹ In addition to sources already cited, see: Rumyantseva (ed.) 1979; James 1994, pp. 144–53; Dunayevskaya 1982, Chapter V; Moon and Brockmeyer 1977; Levine 1992; Montgomery 1967. The classic non-Marxist elaboration of the importance of the frontier, developed by US historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s, is to be found in Turner 1921.

²² Marx and Aveling 2000. Some passages in this essay are drawn from my introduction to that work.
structural changes that transformed United States society in the half century from 1865 to 1920,’ labour historian Melvyn Dubofsky has commented, ‘continuously reshaped the composition of the working class,’ to the extent that in retrospect it gives the impression of being ‘in a state of permanent flux rather than a class in process of formation’. The Marx-Aveling account is like a single frame, or at most a brief scene, from a motion-picture. It provides a partial indication that Marx’s analytical prediction was on target. But further developments showed that other factors would have to be identified as powerful obstacles to the realisation of socialist hopes in America.23

The initial labour party stirrings failed to yield any durable alternative to the pro-capitalist Republican and Democratic parties. In 1887, Frederick Engels – sharing his friends’ hopes – had hailed the first political steps through which ‘the laboring masses should feel their community of grievances and of interests, their solidarity as a class in opposition to all other classes,’ expecting that the embryonic labour party would ‘find the common remedy for these common grievances’ and eventually advance this remedy (socialism) in its party platform. Such hopes were bitterly disappointed: not only did the mass political insurgency fail to embrace socialism, but it soon collapsed and was largely reabsorbed by the Democratic and Republican parties. In an 1893 letter, Engels sought to explain why ‘American conditions involve very great and peculiar difficulties for a steady development of a workers’ party’. The three factors he identified – imperfectly grasped in the Marx-Aveling account – became ingredients in the analyses of innumerable historians seeking to explain the absence of a labour party and socialist movement in the United States:

First, the Constitution, based as in England upon party government, which makes it appear as though every vote were lost that is cast for a candidate not put up by one of the two governing parties. And the American, like the Englishman, wants to exert an influence on his state; he does not want to throw his vote away.

Then, and more especially, immigration, which divides the workers into two groups: the native-born and the foreigners, and the latter in turn into (1) the Irish, (2) the Germans, (3) the many small groups – Czechs, Poles, Italians, Scandinavians, etc. – who understand only their own language. And in addition the Negroes. Very powerful incentives are needed to form

23 Marx and Engels in Le Blanc (ed.) 1996, p. 130; Dubofsky 1975, p. 3.
a single party out of these elements. There is sometimes a sudden strong élan, but the bourgeoisie need only wait passively, and the dissimilar elements of the working class will fall apart again.

Third. Lastly the protective tariff system must have enabled the workers to participate in the sort of prosperity which we in Europe (apart from Russia, where, however, not the workers profit from it but the bourgeoisie) have not seen for years.  

The poisonous impact of ethnic hatreds and pervasive racism – fleetingly touched on in Engels’s brief comments but hardly comprehended in the Marx-Aveling account – continues to be felt down to the present day. Complex specifics of the intersection of class, racial, and gender identities – and the decisive meaning of this for the experience, consciousness, struggles, and the future evolution, of the US working class – were generally beyond the grasp of even the most sophisticated nineteenth-century socialists. They have eluded the comprehension of many latter-day Marxists as well.

Less surprising is the relative inattention of Eleanor Marx, Aveling, and Engels to the rising populist movement among hard-pressed farmers in the South and the Midwest. After all, their concern was with the working-class movement (the movement of those whose living was based on the sale of labour-power for wages), whereas the small farmers who formed the populist base have generally been seen as a ‘petty-bourgeois’ layer – small-scale landowners engaged in petty commodity production – destined to be crowded out by larger and more efficient business interests as the capitalist economy continued to develop along lines of growing productivity. The populist revolt against such capitalist progress was seen by many deterministic leftists (and also many influential historians) as ‘reactionary’ by definition.

The fact is, however, that, in the 1890s, a powerful challenge was mounted by these embattled small farmers, in alliance with sections of the labour movement (the Knights of Labor, the American Railway Union, trade-union activists in Chicago and other Midwestern urban areas), and with various radical and maverick currents, to defend democracy (rule by the people) from plutocracy (rule by the rich), a challenge which was deflected into the Democratic Party and then decisively crushed by a Republican Party electoral

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effort that was massively financed by big-business interests in the Presidential campaign of 1896. In fact, some Marxist-influenced labour activists of the time scornfully rejected the notion that they should make common cause with the ‘petty-bourgeois’ farmers.

What is intriguing is that, almost two decades earlier, in a comment to his friend Engels about the violent nationwide labour uprising of 1877, Karl Marx had suggested the possibility of the predominantly white working-class movement merging with struggles of African-American agricultural labour in the South (just betrayed by the Republican Party sell-out that dismantled Reconstruction) and the hard-pressed small farmers who would eventually spearhead the populist movement. This was, however, a fleeting insight in Marx’s massive intellectual output. Such fertile speculation about the possibility and desirability of far-reaching social alliances was beyond the range of his thoughtful daughter in 1887, or even of his shrewd co-thinker in 1893.

The failure of majority sectors of the US labouring population to make common cause enabled political representatives of the big-business ‘robber barons’ to divide and conquer the various lower-class challengers, consolidating the control of industrial and financial corporations over the nation’s economic development and political life. The Democratic Party – based on an alliance of Southern agrarian interests and political machines catering to immigrant communities in Northern urban centres – claimed to be the party of labour. So did the Republican Party, which favoured high tariffs facilitating the forward march of industry that would bring jobs and prosperity for all. And, when push came to shove, both were dedicated to the triumph of American capitalism that was making the United States a great world power. An additional factor beyond the scope of Engels’s comments was the consequent overseas economic expansion through the ‘Open Door Policy’ – backed by ‘dollar diplomacy’ and ‘gunboat diplomacy’ – designed to secure foreign markets, raw materials, and investment opportunities that were vital to the future of America’s dynamic market economy. The overwhelming triumph of corporate capitalism, no less than the ethnic and racial fragmentation of the US working class, had a profound impact on the manner in which the US labour movement was to develop.

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26 Timothy Messer-Kruse 1998 suggests that there were, in fact, certain dogmatic, sectarian, ‘workerist’ elements in the early Marxist orientation in the United States that blocked its connection with indigenous radical traditions that might have helped generate a multi-faceted mass socialist movement.
By the dawn of the twentieth century, the movement which Marx and Aveling had described was pulling into increasingly conservatised and radicalised components. The labour-radicals reflected the socialist commitments and inclinations identified in the Marx/Aveling book of the previous decade, with many ‘unconscious socialists’ (one thinks of Eugene V. Debs, ‘Big Bill’ Haywood, and others) becoming sufficiently conscious to organise the Socialist Party of America (1901) and the Industrial Workers of the World (1905), both mass organisations which would in some ways represent the high-point of US labour radicalism. The labour-conservatives – including some who had also been influenced by socialism – sought to guide organised labour into a ‘realistic’ accommodation with the triumphant capitalist order. Within this order, a moderated and narrowly economic ‘pure-and-simple’ trade unionism might secure, at least for the more skilled and organised sectors of the labour force, better working conditions, a shorter working day, and higher wages at the workplace. Radicals saw this not only as a betrayal of the labour movement’s lofty ideals, but also as a short-sighted betrayal of the majority of the less skilled and less organised workers. Such a tension and division in the ranks of labour, never fully resolved one way or the other, shaped the history of the US working class throughout the twentieth century: periodically, it seems to be the story of labour conservatism becoming overwhelmingly dominant and labour-radicalism marginalised – and then an explosion of militancy tips a different balance into existence.\(^{27}\)

The years in which the conservatism of Gompers is being challenged by the radicalism represented by Debs and Haywood is the point at which Kautsky’s essay appears. He hardly attempts a polemical intervention into the American labour scene, however. The tone is rather that of an engaged scholar sorting through complex realities in order to find patterns that will deepen our understanding. While not entirely satisfying, it contains much that is impressive.

\(^{27}\) In addition to works cited in footnotes 1, 17, 19, 24 above, valuable information on US capitalism and anticapitalist movements can be found in the substantial account by participant-observer Friedrich A. Sorge in his Sorge 1977, and Buhle, Buhle, and Georgakas (eds.) 1992. Philip S. Foner’s ten-volume History of the Labor Movement in the United States (1947–94) remains an invaluable resource.
Kautsky and his comrades

Reading Karl Kautsky’s 1906 essay ‘The American Worker’, one finds an admirable thoughtfulness well served by a clarity of expression, characteristic of his best writing. Still, it is more a survey with suggestive ideas rather than a rounded analysis. It combines the qualities of a lengthy review of Sombart’s *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, a sophisticated polemic against German reformism, and an unfinished study of the American working class. Its virtues cannot be shrugged off: rich comparisons of capitalism and the working class in the United States with those in Russia, England, Germany; insightful points regarding immigration and the dialectic of class and ethnicity; shrewd comments on both industrial and agricultural development; the presentation of illuminating statistical material on a variety of questions.

The apparent triumph of democracy and prosperity in the capitalist United States posed a challenge for Kautsky and other socialists. ‘Why become a socialist, why struggle for a distant future, if a considerable part of the socialist aims had become a reality in America, at least until quite recently?’ The starkness of this challenge is only partly mitigated by the three last words.28

But he shared Sombart’s expectation that ‘all the factors that till now have prevented the development of socialism in the United States are about to disappear or to be converted into their opposite’, and, from that standpoint, he took the offensive, as a revolutionary socialist, against reformist-socialist efforts to reorient the German Social-Democratic Party and the Second International. From this perspective, he applauds Sombart’s critical contrast of capitalist trade unionism – the moderate ‘pure-and-simple’ unionism, focused only on wages, hours, working conditions, and ‘carved from the same wood as capitalism itself’ – and socialist trade unionism, ‘also tailored to success in the present, but at the same time [not losing] sight of the proletarian class-movement against capitalism’.29 From the same standpoint, he sharply asserts (with words as relevant to labour supporters of liberal-capitalist politicians as to working-class parties that would form governmental alliances with them): ‘Only those who have forgotten the fundamental difference between Social Democracy [i.e., socialism] and liberalism can be of the opinion that a trade-union leader, or any other leader of the proletariat, can represent its interests from a post he owes to the liberals’.

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28 Indeed, this question becomes the organising (and distorting) theme of R. Laurence Moore’s informative but somewhat stilted study Moore 1970.
This Kautsky/Sombart distinction could be utilised to justify the newly-formed Industrial Workers of the World, or even the earlier sectarian project of Daniel De Leon’s Socialist Labor Party to establish a Socialist Trade and Labour Alliance competing with the AFL. But, for the substantial number of socialists in the AFL, predominating in about one-third of the Federation’s affiliates, it meant helping more and more AFL members, and eventually the Federation as a whole, move beyond ‘pure-and-simple’ unionism, break definitively from all procapitalist political parties (Democrats and Republicans alike), and embrace the cause of socialism.

More stimulating for scholars, however, will be Kautsky’s less polemical comments – especially his marvellous comparisons. ‘If the American capitalists constitute a much more homogeneous class than in England,’ he points out, ‘nowhere is the working class more heterogeneous than in the United States’.

Kautsky’s failure to focus attention on the centrality of racism in this working-class fragmentation is striking, but not surprising given its absence in the book that he is reviewing and the relative backwardness of both US and European socialists on this question. Another obvious limitation is the failure to discuss more fully something that was intimately experienced by all American workers – the nature of, and the ongoing transformation of, the labour process. Both of these realities, we will see, must be comprehended if we wish to understand the working class of the United States.

There are other slips. Kautsky offers an interesting generalisation on the absence of a precapitalist class of aristocratic and militaristic landowners (most dramatically the Prussian Jünkers), adding the qualification that ‘I am ignoring here the Southern planters, whose régime came to an end when that of the capitalists began’, presumably with the conclusion of the Civil War. This is open to more than one challenge. Did not a régime of the capitalists exist in the United States from the very beginning of the republic? Did not the slavocracy constitute a peculiar variation of and faction within the bourgeoisie? Did not much of the former slavocracy end up, with the defeat of Reconstruction, maintaining its control of much of the land and re-conquering much of its political power in the South and nationally? Did not the political culture of the United States continue to feel the impact of this reactionary, authoritarian, militaristic stratum – especially rooted within the Southern élite – that Kautsky shrugs off?\footnote{See Hacker 1941, Van Woodward 1951 and Dawley 1991.}
Nonetheless, there is much that holds up well – especially with the dramatic Russian-US comparisons. ‘In America we can speak more than anywhere else about the dictatorship of capital. In contrast, nowhere has the fighting proletariat reached such significance as in Russia, and this significance must and will increase, because this country has just now begun to take part in the modern class struggle’. His next layer of comparison is no less intriguing: ‘Germany’s economy is closest to the American model; its politics, on the other hand, is closest to the Russian’. And, obviously, such comments as these would endear him to such Russian revolutionaries as Lenin and Trotsky, as well as such leaders of Germany’s revolutionary Left as Rosa Luxemburg.

Returning to the Russia/America contrast, Kautsky notes that ‘as a capitalist land [the United States] is not older than Russia’, but that capitalist development in Russia has been more dependent on foreign investment, while in the United States ‘a very considerable section of the industrial proletariat comes from abroad, indeed from the four corners of the world, whereas its capital is totally indigenous and almost completely confined to the circle of interests of industrial capital’. Consequently, in Russia, capital is weaker and the proletariat is stronger, while, in the US, capital is stronger and the proletariat weaker ‘than what they should be according to the degree of industrial development of the country’.

Kautsky goes on to tell us that more Russian workers are imbued with ‘revolutionary romanticism’, while a much greater proportion of US workers follow the leadership of practical-minded moderates dealing ‘only with the nearest and most tangible things’. This he links to differences in the intelligentsia of the two countries.

The point Kautsky articulates here – associating the development of working-class consciousness with the intellectual and cultural efforts of the intelligentsia – represents one of his most original contributions to theorisations of the absence of a substantial socialist movement in the United States, overlapping with later analytical orientations associated with Lenin, Lukács and Gramsci. Deserving a separate essay in itself, Kautsky’s striking suggestion should at least be highlighted in some of its specific elements.

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31 Kautsky does not deal with the fact that the actual history of class struggle in the United States involves much greater violence than is the case in Europe. See Adamic 1931, which documents this reality while suggesting how it interlinks with the relative conservatism suggested by Sombart and Kautsky.
• Thanks to the repressive and restrictive peculiarities of the Tsarist system, ‘in Russia the intelligentsia, because of its social position, has become the indispensable agency through which revolutionary consciousness is brought to the proletariat, which it resembles in many respects’.

• In stark contrast, the intelligentsia in the United States ‘represents the connecting link between the proletariat and the capitalist class’. This is related to the level of US capitalist development. ‘As long as capital is scanty, and its profit small, the capitalist is stingy in his personal consumption, he is puritanical and full of contempt, not only for senseless luxury and pomp, but also for serious art and science’. (Such is the case in backward Russia, he implies – although one can find similar limitations among US industrialists up to the 1880s.) ‘But the more capital and the rate of exploitation grow, the easier it becomes for the capitalist to let accumulation go ahead at full speed and at the same time to increase his personal consumption and feed an army of unproductive workers, lackeys of all sorts, learned and unlearned, aesthetic and unaesthetic, ethical and cynical’. This helps to generate a corporate capitalist culture that infiltrates innumerable aspects of working-class life and consciousness.32

• In fact, ‘many proletarians enter politics, journalism, and the legal professions, which because of the conditions of the country constitute vast sources of enrichment, ladders through which a man can escape from the ranks of the propertyless. The American intelligentsia is therefore dominated by the desire to get rich, filled with the most unscrupulous capitalism of the soul’.

• Workers in the United States, while often responding critically to certain specifics of their oppression, Kautsky comments, have not been inclined toward ‘enquiring into and opposing the totality of the existing social order’. The development of ‘a resolute class consciousness, as well as . . . the setting of great goals involving the transformation of the entire society’, cannot – as in Tsarist Russia – be advanced by the bulk of the US intelligentsia. ‘From this intelligentsia the worker can receive no enlightenment about his interests or about the historical tasks of his class. The American intellectual knows nothing about these matters, and when he knows something, he takes pains to hide it carefully’.33

32 A suggestive case study illustrating such a transition from bourgeois narrowness to bourgeois cultural hegemony can be found in Couvares 1984.
33 See Baritz 1965 and Fones-Wolf 1994. The seduction of creative intellectuals by
An additional insight was articulated only incompletely, requiring more careful development particularly by Lenin and others building on Lenin’s perspective. It involved the understanding that capitalism had been developing ‘more and more’, by the turn of the century, into a new stage – ‘the stage of private monopoly, of the trusts’. (The terms ‘trusts’ and ‘monopoly’ refer to the rise of big business corporations – involving, as Lenin put it, ‘the concentration of production’ and ‘the merging or concrescence of banks with industry.’) Kautsky characterised this as a system ‘of capitalist feudalism that gives to a few families absolute domination over the whole capitalist economy and oppresses more and more even the small capitalists, making completely hopeless any aspiration of the proletariat to enter the ranks of the bourgeoisie’. He seems somewhat uncertain, however, over precisely how this fits with other aspects of his survey, and it seems to remain one item on a list rather than a key dynamic in an analysis.

Related to this, we find no serious discussion of imperialism – an issue that he did take up three years later in The Road to Power. The points made in that later work are illuminating. Noting that ‘capitalism constantly expands further and must constantly expand, if its exploitation is not to become completely intolerable’, Kautsky remarks: ‘Everywhere in Asia and Africa, the spirit of rebellion is spreading. There, the use of European weapons, too, is spreading; resistance to European exploitation is growing. Capitalist exploitation cannot be transplanted into a country without the seed of rebellion against this exploitation also being sown there’. Such struggles, he concludes, ‘are weakening European capitalism and its governments and introducing an element of political unrest into the whole world’. This makes all the more disappointing Kautsky’s failure in ‘The American Worker’ to explore, in the era of Teddy Roosevelt’s ‘big stick’ diplomacy, connections between imperialist policies and the conditions and consciousness of the US working class.

Kautsky does suggest that the rise of corporate power, intensifying the

capitalism is suggested by comments of the once-leftist film-maker Elia Kazan (in his memoir Kazan 1989, p. 459), describing his thinking in the early 1950s: ‘Was I really a leftist? Had I ever been? Did I really want to change the social system I was living under? Apparently that was what I’d stood for at one time. But what shit! Everything I had of value I’d gained under that system’. But see Daniel Bell’s complaint over countervailing tendencies regarding some intellectuals and artists becoming ideologically subversive ‘protagonists of the adversary culture’ in Bell 1976.

35 Sweezy 1968, pp. 262, 269.
exploitation of the US working class, undermines the analyses of the reformists. But, first, he reviews the exceptional conditions that – one would expect – made the United States the ideal location for a successful reformist strategy. ‘Nowhere are the conditions, which according to our revisionists can assure the economic progress of the working class within the capitalist mode of production, more highly developed than in the United States: complete democracy, the greatest freedom of organisation and the press, the highest possible social equality of rights.’ (It is indicative, however, of Kautsky’s limited understanding that he does not comment that this ‘social equality of rights’ did not extend to African-Americans and other people of colour.) Kautsky adds that ‘though the reserve of free lands has shrunk, it has not yet been completely exhausted. And on top of that comes also a strong development of the trade unions’. He points out that, from 1896 to 1904, the membership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) grew from 271,315 members to 1,672,300 members. But the power of the big-business trusts, ‘whose rise in the United States began simultaneously with the already mentioned strengthening of the trade unions, but whose force has grown more rapidly’, has blocked the further growth of the unions, even bringing a decline in union membership.

While some of the AFL unions have been able to continue improving their situation, ‘the progress of some strata’ has been ‘more than counteracted by the retrogression of the great masses’. This means ‘an absolute deterioration in the situation of the American working class’. Thanks to the power of ‘private monopoly’, the proletariat’s ‘participation in the product of national labour has declined enormously’, regardless of the historical exceptions that benefited US workers in the past.

Flowing from this came an expectation of working-class radicalisation and a forecast brimming with revolutionary optimism – a future ‘flourishing of socialism in America’, and an expectation that ‘perhaps America will give us, even before Europe, the example of a proletariat conquering political and economic power’. In Kautsky’s opinion, ‘the Golden Age for the American worker within the capitalist mode of production lays, not before, but behind

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37 Kautsky was unambiguously opposed to racism as he understood it (for example, see Kautsky 1988, 116–146), yet it must be noted that, as with so many white leftists, he failed to deal with white racism even when – as with any adequate analysis of the US working class – it was a central element in what he was analysing. On limitations of white socialists in the United States regarding race, see Miller 1996, pp. 33–44, 153–98, and Foner 1977.
him; that his social position vis-à-vis capital – and that is the decisive thing – is continually worsening’.

After the experience of a century, one might argue that this perspective proved to be far too linear. Another (in some ways, even greater) Golden Age for the US working class opened up four decades after Kautsky wrote these lines – although, with the passage of a few additional decades, much of what had been won was again lost. The dynamics of modern capitalism have resulted in multiple successions of composition, decomposition, and recomposition – of the working class, of the labour movement, of living and working conditions. Of course, in the early years of the twenty-first century, ‘the flourishing of socialism in America’ seems as far away as ever.

Unfortunately, none of Kautsky’s American comrades came close to surpassing his contribution. Isaac Hourwich was able to produce an outstanding study of *Immigration and Labor*, but this made no pretence of offering the analytical sweep one finds in Kautsky’s essay. A.M. Simons fashioned an interesting socialist history of the United States – *Social Forces in American History* – but its economic determinism and fatalistic optimism about a socialist future provide little insight into why socialism failed to become a greater force in American life. Most of Morris Hillquit’s classic *History of Socialism in the United States* holds up quite well – but, in dealing with the past failures of US socialism, he offered nothing that cannot be found in Engels and less than can be found in Kautsky’s suggestive comments. Austin Lewis’s *The Militant Proletariat* is the product of a creative thinker, far more inclined than the other Americans mentioned here to explore fault-lines within the US labour movement and the working class (especially those separating skilled workers and craft unions from the rest of the working class) – but here, too, at a certain point, critical analysis is engulfed by revolutionary optimism.38

38 Simons 1911, Hillquit 1910, Lewis 1911. For a capable survey of US socialist thought in this period, see Hughan 1911. Only the brilliant, idiosyncratic William English Walling offered a comprehensive analytical orientation that surpassed the boundaries of Kautsky’s analysis (in his trilogy *Socialism As It Is*, *The Larger Aspects of Socialism*, and *Progressivism – And After*). And yet – emphasising ‘the class struggle within the working class’ between skilled and unskilled workers that Lewis noted, and decrying ‘the successive idealization of the industrial working class’ – Walling insisted: ‘The ruling class or ruling classes are more or less unified; Socialism represents the opposition of all the rest of the population, but not of a class. It is not a struggle between classes; it is a struggle of the ruling class against the rest of the human race.’ Such notions, but especially his unstable character and commitments, placed him outside the Marxist dialogue and debate. See Walling 1912, p. 331; Walling 1914, pp. 207–19; Walling 1913, p. xii; and Boylan 1998.
Certainly, an aspect of this analytical weakness was related to the fact that, in this period, it appeared that the Socialist Party of America and the IWW were in the process of bringing an end to socialism’s absence on the American scene. The fact remains, however, that there were no US Marxists of the period who were able to build on Kautsky’s contributions in order to deepen and advance his analysis. Only in later decades would they be matched and surpassed.

**American exceptionalism – and beyond**

One must look in the ranks and the dissident fringes of the communist movement to find new contributions to understanding the realities with which Kautsky grappled. Disappointments and defeats seasoned such efforts with important new insights.

The socialist upsurge of the Progressive Era (1900–20) was brought to an end with the super-patriotic repression and ‘red scare’ of World War I and its aftermath. Varieties of ‘100-percent Americanism’ were employed to push back the earlier socialist influences. Socialism and other aspects of Marxist thought were, in one way or another, found to be ‘foreign’ imports inconsistent with both reality and morality in the United States of America. Residues of this outlook remained powerful even during the ‘Red Decade’ of the 1930s and beyond. In a 1939 essay designed introduce a broad US readership to Marx’s *Capital*, Leon Trotsky complained:

> In certain American circles there is a tendency to repudiate this or that radical theory without the slightest scientific criticism, by simply dismissing it as ‘un-American.’ But where can you find the differentiating criterion of that? Christianity was imported into the United States along with logarithms, Shakespeare’s poetry, notions on the rights of man and the citizen, and certain other not unimportant products of human thought. Today Marxism stands in the same category.39

Trotsky went on to emphasise that Marx’s classic account of capitalism, in some ways, is more relevant to the United States than to Europe. ‘Although *Capital* rests on international material, preponderantly English, in its theoretical foundation it is an analysis of pure capitalism, capitalism in general, capitalism

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39 Trotsky 1939, p. 34.
as such’, he noted. ‘Undoubtedly, the capitalism grown on the virgin, unhistorical soil of America comes closest to that ideal type of capitalism.’

This begs the question of why, in contrast to Europe’s capitalist societies, a mass socialist workers’ movement failed to arise in the most purely and highly developed capitalist United States. Since the development of capitalism results in the development of an increasingly large working class, and since – according to Marx – the workers are the gravediggers of capitalism and the agency for the coming socialist order, one would expect that the most highly developed capitalist society would have the most highly developed working-class socialist movement. The opposite seems to be the case.

Those seeking to apply Marxist generalisations to US specifics have more than once emphasised the ‘exceptional’ realities of American history that may require modifications in the revolutionary Marxist orientation. Lewis Corey – under the name Louis Fraina a buoyant founder of American communism, but an independent Marxist theorist in the 1930s – asserted that an essential aspect of ‘Americanising’ Marxism involves developing an ‘analysis of the special problems created by peculiarities in the development of the American economy, class relations, and labor movement’.

This was a tenet of what had come to be known as ‘American exceptionalism’, developed by a current in the Communist Party led by Jay Lovestone, a current with which Corey informally identified after it was expelled from the Communist International for differing with the alleged ‘greatest living theoretical and political leader of the working class’, Joseph Stalin. A pamphlet-length critique of Corey’s ambitious 1934 study _The Decline of American Capitalism_ minced no words. ‘Especially it should be remembered that it was Stalin who led the fight against the theory of American exceptionalism, as far back as 1928, when Lovestone had begun to defend it’, noted V.J. Jerome and Alexander Bittelman. ‘Since then the Communist Party of the United States of the United States has been waging its main theoretical battles on the basis of Stalin’s analysis of American capitalism against all bourgeois and social-reformist theories of American exceptionalism.’ It was Bertram D. Wolfe who aggressively defended the theoretical views of the Lovestone group:

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40 Trotsky 1939, p. 35.
41 Corey 1932, p. 28. Various ‘exceptionalist’ explanations are critically examined in the detailed, valuable, but hardly conclusive study by Lipset and Marks 2000. In some ways more satisfactory (and far more lively) is the information-packed study by Sexton 1991. Also see Jerome Karabel’s fine essay, Karabel 1979.
Yes, we consider that conditions in America are different from conditions in Germany or Spain or the Soviet Union. We are more than ‘American exceptionalists.’ We are ‘exceptionalists’ for every country of the world! And in pleading guilty to considering the conditions of each country different from those of the rest, peculiar, ‘exceptional,’ we are in good company – the company of Marx and Lenin.43

If the general theory of Marxism is the result of vast powers of generalization distilled from the investigation of concrete reality, it becomes a guide to action only in so far as it is concretely applied to living situations and realistically grasped and analyzed. . . . This requires, in the first place, an analysis of the special development and peculiar features of American capitalism, and in this sense, except for fragmentary hints from the pens of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and partial beginnings made by certain American Marxians, the development of ‘American Marxism’ (in the sense of the application of Marxian theory to the analysis of American conditions) has scarcely begun.44

Unfortunately, neither Corey nor Wolfe was able to go very far in making original or durable contributions to this project before they themselves drew away from Marxism. By the 1940s, their disillusionment over the failure of the US working class to live up to revolutionary expectations, and their conclusion that the USSR had become an irredeemably and dangerously totalitarian force in the world, resulted in their abandonment of Marxism (a common – though hardly universal – development within the non-Stalinist Left). But their 1930s challenge that US Marxists – and other Marxists – must develop a serious understanding of the specifics and peculiarities of US realities continues to ring true.45

43 Wolfe 1933a, p. 15.
44 Wolfe 1933b, pp. 432–33. A more specific aspect of the Lovestone faction’s ‘American exceptionalism’ perspective was that (in the words of critic James P. Cannon) ‘they foresaw [in 1928–9] no economic crisis on the American horizon and consequently no prospects for a radicalization of the American working class’ (Cannon 1962, p. 183). The Lovestoneites shifted away from this specific when the Great Depression hit, though, years later, Wolfe commented (Wolfe 1981, p. 461): ‘That the American economy was still destined to ascend and take greater precedence in world power for some time to come can now with hindsight be declared to be clear, as the next three or four decades were to show, despite the Great Depression.’
45 See Hessen 1990, Buhle 1995 and Buhle and Rice-Maxim 1995. In Wolfe 1967, p. 207, Wolfe lamented: ‘And what if History fails to force the working class to accept the goal that Marx’s science has assigned to it? What if enslavement and degradation, or corruption, or wilfulness, or caprice, should be such as to unfit it for, or cause it to reject, the mission of redeeming all mankind?’
Yet, in a friendly but critical review of *Decline of American Capitalism*, George Novack complained about ‘Corey’s’ habit of treating the development of American capitalism not as an integral part of the evolution of world capitalism, but apart from it’. In fact, according to Corey, ‘capitalism in the United States came to real power with the Civil War and the progressive forces expressed and invigorated by that struggle’. Novack disagreed. ‘From its origins the American economy has been either capitalist in character or a subsidiary part of the world capitalist economy’, he insisted. ‘American capitalism, no less than European capitalism, had an international foundation throughout all the stages of its evolution’.46

Novack stressed that the ‘exceptional’ features of American capitalist development could only be understood as part of a global dialectic:

> In reality, the special peculiarities of American capitalism were a product of the given constellation of economic forces constituting the world market, in which the economic forces of the United States were throughout this period a subordinate factor. The peculiarities of its economic development were not spontaneously generated from within itself alone, but were the outcome of the interactions between the national and the international productive forces and relations.47

It should not be surprising that Novack’s internationalist emphasis was rooted in the orientation of his intellectual and political mentor Leon Trotsky. In his aforementioned 1939 essay, Trotsky also sought to place American ‘peculiarities’ in global context. He noted that capitalism had developed in Europe not only through the ruination of artisans, craftsmen and peasants but also by overseas conquests. ‘The exploitation of classes was supplemented, and its potency increased by the exploitation of nations’. Colonialism, an essential element in emergent capitalism in Europe, had enabled the capitalists of the ‘mother countries’ to create ‘a privileged position for its own proletariat, especially the upper layers, by paying for it with some of the super-profits garnered in the colonies. In its expanded manifestation bourgeois democracy became, and continues to remain, a form of government accessible only to the most aristocratic and the most exploitative nations’. Although, by the end of the twentieth century, there would be a dramatic expansion of ‘bourgeois democracy’, in the 1930s, Trotsky’s comments were quite relevant, and US

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47 Novack 1976, p. 296.
capitalist development fit precisely within this Bolshevik-Leninist analysis. ‘The United States, which formally has almost no colonies, is nevertheless the most privileged of all the nations of history’, wrote Trotsky. ‘Active immigrants from Europe took possession of an exceedingly rich continent, exterminated the native population, seized the best part of Mexico and bagged the lion’s share of the world’s wealth’.48

The situation of the United States in the global scheme of things – influenced, in one way or another, by the Leninist understanding of imperialism – also received detailed attention from such independent Marxists as Scott Nearing in the 1920s, what came to be known as ‘the Monthly Review school’ (particularly Paul Sweezy, Leo Huberman, Paul Baran, Harry Magdoff) beginning in the 1940s, and William Appleman Williams in his classic study The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (first published in 1959).49

There is another important point to be made regarding the place of the United States in the global development of capitalism. Marx had commented that the more advanced capitalist country shows to those less advanced what their future will be. This assumed a new meaning as the supremacy of British capitalism in Marx’s time was replaced by US capitalist supremacy. US historian Eric Foner has suggested that ‘a preoccupation with the exceptional elements of the American experience obscures those common patterns and processes that transcend national boundaries, most notably the global expansion of capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its political and ideological ramifications’. Foner suggests that ‘because mass politics, mass culture, and mass consumption came to America before it did to Europe’, socialists in ‘exceptional’ America have been merely ‘the first to face the dilemma of how to define socialist politics in a capitalist democracy’.50

We should recall Georg Lukács’s observations in the late 1920s of prominent bourgeois currents in Europe being attracted to the US model of democracy, ‘in which every possibility for the free development, accumulation and expansion of capital is given, while at the same time the external forms of democracy are preserved – but in such a way that the working masses cannot exert any influence whatever on the actual political leadership’.51

48 Trotsky 1939, p. 40.
In the same period, Antonio Gramsci, analysing the realities of ‘Americanism and Fordism’ from a prison in fascist Italy, discussed the implications for Europe of the socio-economic development of US capitalism – ‘an ultra-modern form of production and of working methods’ in which industrial and commercial life, freed from ‘parasitic sedimentations’ of Europe’s precapitalist traditions, is able to develop on ‘a sound basis’, allowing increased efficiency and productivity. ‘These economies affected production costs and permitted higher wages and lower selling prices’, which was combined with ‘various social benefits’ and ‘extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda’ promoting capitalism among the workers. Also involved, however, were greater ideological, cultural, and social controls over the working class – especially including control over the labour process through which capitalists ‘maintain the continuity of the physical and muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker’. Gramsci raised the possibility that ‘America, through the implacable weight of its economic production . . . will compel or is already compelling Europe to overturn its excessively antiquated economic and social basis’, thereby generating ‘a new culture’ and ‘new way of life’ which are being spread around under the American label.’

As we noted in our earlier discussion of ‘triumphant capitalism’, the sombre post-World War II analyses of such theorists as Herbert Marcuse concluded that the combined economic-technological-ideological onslaught of modern capitalism – with a consumerist ‘mass culture’ pioneered in the United States but engulfing ‘advanced capitalist’ societies of other lands – was creating a ‘one-dimensional’ society in which the consciousness of the working-class majority was being inexorably pulled into a deradicalised and non-revolutionary orbit. The absence of socialism in the United States was possibly the precursor for the absence of socialism globally.

**Latent socialism**

If the ‘one-dimensional’ prognostications of Marcuse went far beyond Kautsky’s conceptualisations, the same is true of the most perceptive defenders of the revolutionary-Marxist tradition.

The notion of workers brainwashed by capitalist ‘mass culture’ was sharply challenged as a ‘totally unhistorical’ conception by the black Marxist historian

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and cultural critic C.L.R. James. ‘To believe that the great masses of the people are merely passive recipients of what the purveyors of popular art have given to them is in reality to see people as dumb slaves’, James pointed out. He went on to emphasise the need ‘to examine more closely the conditions in which these new arts, the film, and with it the comic strip, the radio and jazz have arisen, in order to see exactly why they become an expression of mass response to society, crises, and the nature and limitations of that response’. Writing in the United States of the early 1950s, he stressed that ‘the mass is not merely passive. It decides what it will see. It will pay to see that’. This means that, in important ways, it is not capitalist ‘culture moguls’ that manipulate the working class, but the tastes and desires of the masses that shape popular culture: ‘The makers of movies, the publishers of comic books are in violent competition with each other for the mass to approve what they produce. Any success tends to be repeated and squeezed dry, for these people are engaged primarily in making money. Huge and consistent successes are an indication of mass demand’.53

This dovetails with the 1956 perceptions of Harry Braverman, like James, trained intellectually and educated politically in the Trotskyist movement, and, like James, now trying to stretch beyond ‘traditional’ theory he had absorbed as a Trotskyist in order to comprehend new realities. He identified positive shifts regarding ‘a certain body of elementary ideas about race, politics, cooperation, sex and women’s rights, our heritage of freedom and independence, civil liberties, art, culture, humanism, and the promise of the future’. Since the 1920s, the new sensibilities had ‘seeped through the land – unevenly, vaguely, and in still limited doses, but noticeably’. There were multiple sources: ‘The unions, the New Dealers, the last generation of radicals all had a lot to do with it. But even the regulation instruments of information and culture – the newspapers with their reports of strange new events around the world, the flood of paperback books, some motion pictures, increased secondary and higher education especially for veterans, and so forth – had a hand in the gradual change’. In Braverman’s opinion, ‘the result has been a considerable and growing body of humanism, toleration, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and a general spread of a more mature mood and approach’.54

53 James 1993, pp. 122–3.
54 Braverman 1956, p. 11. This can be linked to important left-wing cultural influences discussed in Michael Denning’s valuable study, Denning 1998, although Denning’s overly broad conceptualisation of the ‘popular front’ distorts his material – as demonstrated in Warren 1999. Also relevant to Braverman’s comments is Lipsitz 1994.
Braverman connected such observations on popular culture with an argument that the allegedly ‘middle-class’ transformation of the US working class – while having an element of truth – was greatly overstated, and that, in some ways, ‘the workers have achieved a greater consciousness of class than ever before’. He elaborated:

The worker has been conservatized by his higher standard of living, but it is a surface change which can be sloughed off with great rapidity when he realizes his income is threatened. Moreover, the worker by and large has not too much real confidence in this prosperity as a permanent affair – not because he is an economist but because the conditions of the factory, with layoffs and rumors of layoffs even in the best years and the basic insecurities of a proletarian life constantly refresh his recollections. . . . The worker . . . knows he is an interchangeable part in mass industry, and nothing else. His car and house don’t change that in his mind, and in that respect his illusions are modified.55

In Braverman’s opinion, the realities he was pointing to demonstrated that ‘it is wrong to get too exclusively preoccupied with the problems and harassments of the moment, to the point where the big and slow-moving changes are forgotten’. He added: ‘Future crises will be met by a generation unlike any that came before, better prepared in many ways, and able to move forward to great progress in short periods of time’.56

The line of thought developed by James and Braverman brings to mind the comments by Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling in the 1880s regarding the ‘unconscious socialism’ prevalent in the perceptions, inclinations, hopes and values of growing numbers of US workers. And it certainly opens analytical paths between Kautsky’s discussion of US workers and the work of present-day scholar-activists who see the continuing relevance of socialist struggles for the working class and the labour movement.

The notion of a latent socialism existing within the actually-existing working class has recurred, in various forms, among those examining the relationship between workers and socialist ideas in the United States. As we will see, however, this can go in either radical or conservative directions – with James and Braverman both insisting on analytical elements that are more or less

55 Braverman 1956, p. 10. Also see Harvey Swados’s classic 1957 essay, Swados 1962.
56 Braverman 1956, p. 11.
absent from Kautsky’s analysis, but that are necessary if the revolutionary edge of his 1906 orientation is not to be blunted: the dynamics of racism, and the dynamics of the labour process.

In the Depression years of the early 1930s, an idiosyncratic leftist named Leon Samson argued that a popular ideology of ‘Americanism’ – which embraced radical-democratic and egalitarian values, similar to those underlying Marxism – had taken the place of, and in some ways blocked the development of, a socialist-oriented working-class consciousness. In the economic affluence and political conformism of the early 1950s, ex-Marxist historians, political scientists, and sociologists developed this notion by concluding that this was all for the best: American capitalism blending with democratic traditions had more or less fulfilled the hopes and needs that were supposed to have propelled the masses toward socialism.57

A seemingly more radical twist was given to this view by many around the Socialist Party of America in the 1950s and 1960s. For example, ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman – taking off from the post-socialist reflections of Daniel Bell – commented: ‘The socialist movement lives in but is not of this world because the proletariat which is its bearer lives in but at the same time is not of this – that is, of the capitalist – world!’ Insisting on the central importance of the trade unions (whose ‘bureaucratic-conservative’ leadership was denounced by more radical critics), Shachtman emphasised ‘the working class and its natural movement, the unions, are the social force and mainspring from which we draw our inspiration when every trifler and dilettante finds it fashionable to sneer at it’.58 Yet some socialists (including some of Shachtman’s more left-wing comrades), while by no means dismissive of the actually-existing union movement, were not inclined to follow him in his increasingly uncritical orientation toward the labour leadership of George Meany and Walter Reuther.

For Shachtman and other Socialist Party leaders, this necessarily meant enlisting in the procapitalist Democratic Party, whose social-liberalism had long made it the home of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). As Shachtman protégé Michael Harrington explained, the liberal-labour wing of the Democratic Party was

actually – although ‘invisibly’ – a force for socialism. The actual ‘progressive’
social policies of ostensibly procapitalist labour leaders such as George Meany
added up to creating ‘socialist definitions of capitalism’. For some Socialist
Party adherents, the very distinctions between capitalism and socialism became
blurred. William Bohn, once a partisan of the IWW and the Socialist Party’s
revolutionary wing, as a columnist for the semi-socialist New Leader in the
1950s could explain that under US capitalism ‘there are some who are too
rich while others are obviously too poor’ but nonetheless: ‘The system is
flexible. We have changed it. We are changing it. We shall continue to change
it. That is why it works and will continue to work’.  

One is reminded of Kautsky’s 1906 question – ‘why become a socialist,
why struggle for a distant future, if a considerable part of the socialist aims
had become a reality in America?’ While, for Kautsky, this posed a problem,
it helps define the development of a number of intellectuals who chose to
trade in their socialist orientation for liberal (and, in some cases, conservative)
perspectives.

C.L.R. James drew quite different conclusions from his studies of popular
consciousness within American civilisation. He believed revolutionary elements
in the consciousness of the US working class were destined to shift from
‘unconscious’ to conscious socialism (not to be confused with the reformism
of moderate socialists) as difficult economic shifts once again sharpened
contradictions between, on the one hand, the actual development of capitalism
and, on the other, the democratic and egalitarian elements deeply rooted in
the popular culture of the United States.

One of the essential elements of James’s outlook was a radical understanding
of the centrality of racism in undermining class consciousness and class
struggle within the US working class (a view which, in part, was grounded
in the pioneering 1935 study by W.E.B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction). It was
James’s view that an independent African-American movement for black
liberation ‘has got a great contribution to make to the development of the
proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of

Republican Party took note of this trend – for example, Crane 1964. For a look at the
dark side of this orientation, see Buhle 1999, and Chester 1995. Perceptive critiques
of such ‘socialism’ were advanced by other comrades of Max Shachtman who did not

the struggle for socialism’. This outlook identifies what a significant current of analysts – including Alexander Saxton, David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, Karen Brodkin, and Michael Goldfield – see as a fundamental explanation for the failure of socialism in the United States.  

Goldfield’s analysis is the most elaborate and is explicitly developed as an explanation for why the US working class has been unable to move forward to the creation of an effective socialist movement. He notes that there have been a number of historic turning-points in American history which involved mass insurgencies, opened up possibilities for new directions in historical development, and resulted in a restructuring or redefinition of social relationships and politics. Through each of these turning-points, Goldfield sees the persistence of a system of white supremacy and racist ideology, rooted in the culture and economic structure of American capitalism. The function of this ideology is not only to control and exploit African-American and other ‘non-white’ labour, but also ‘to control white workers, isolating them from their potential allies among nonwhites’. While this racism has often undermined the immediate economic interests and organisational strength of white workers, the pervasiveness of white supremacy has been buttressed by ‘many economic, political, ideological, and other institutional supports’. Noting the recurrent instances of white racism leading to fragmentation and defeat, Goldfield also emphasises ‘highlights of labor struggle . . . when class consciousness and organization seemed to be blooming’, underlining that this has been linked to ‘placing the fight against racial discrimination at the top of the agenda’.  

As James pointed out, this could be expected to come not from a white-dominated labour movement but from an independent black struggle that ‘would be able to hit the bourgeoisie a tremendous blow, and by hitting the bourgeoisie a tremendous blow it would bring the proletariat on the scene and break up the Democratic Party’.  

Another divide between James and the socialist moderates is his emphasis on the vital importance of life and struggle at the workplace – a contested terrain where many millions of workers spend at least half of their waking


lives, with their labour making possible the existence of human society, but also where they experience an ongoing exploitation of their labour for the purpose of enriching a minority of wealthy capitalists.\textsuperscript{64}

One of James’s closest collaborators, Martin Glaberman, noted what he saw as three characteristics of working-class struggles: i) they are generally not public but occur at the workplaces, ‘and unless you’re there, you don’t know what’s going on’; ii) they take place over extended periods of time, often changing form as changes are introduced into the labour process; and iii) ‘it’s a slowly maturing thing with a sudden explosion at the end’. Divorced from these, many would-be Marxists degenerate into sectarian arrogance and irrelevance, in the view of James and his co-thinkers. But the leadership of the trade unions had also grown increasingly distant from day-to-day workplace realities and from the experience of rank-and-file workers. The result was that ‘a bureaucratic structure, divorced from its own membership and unable to carry out even the most common and traditional functions of conservative unionism: the protection of jobs and living standards’\textsuperscript{65}

Harry Braverman would have been in substantial agreement with such views. But his pioneering studies of the labour process in the US capitalist economy – particularly \textit{Labor and Monopoly Capital} – identified yet another factor contributing to the erosion of the working-class power, cohesion, and consciousness necessary for the triumph of socialism.

Braverman (and Marx) noted that employers purchase labour-power (the ability to work) from the employees, but to maximise their profits they must squeeze as much \textit{actual labour} as possible from the workers. In order to do this, they have – over and over again – introduced new technologies and managerial strategies to secure greater control over the labour process and the labourers. This involves eroding the power, the skills, and the dignity of their employees – sometimes driving them down into broader and less skilled job categories, sometimes replacing them altogether with machines or cheaper labour or more lucrative investment opportunities. The consequence may be radicalisation of the workers, but it can also involve disorientation and demoralisation.

\textsuperscript{64} James 1993, pp. 166–98.
\textsuperscript{65} Glaberman 1999, pp. 198–9, Glaberman and Faber 1998, p. 31. Relevant to these points is Jeremy Brecher 1997. Considerable attention to the interplay of economic, cultural, political and labour-organisational factors can be found in the contributions – by various radical scholars and thoughtful labour activists – in Hinshaw and Le Blanc (eds.) 2000.
Braverman observed that, as a result of these dynamics of capitalism, ‘classes, the class structure, the social structure as a whole, are not fixed entities but rather ongoing processes, rich in change, transition, variations, and incapable of being encapsulated in formulas, no matter how analytically proper such formulas may be’. The consequent dynamic of repeatedly decomposing and recomposing aspects of the labour process and of sectors of the working class itself has had an impact on its consciousness, culture, and organisation in ways that have sometimes cut across the development of a working-class socialist movement.66

The contributions of James and Braverman – particularly in regard to race and the labour process – draw the notion of ‘latent socialism’ away from the optimistic simplicity that Shachtman was inclined to settle for and into a deeper appreciation of complex realities, more consistent with the revolutionary approach we have noted in Marx.

Enduring commitments

Earlier, we touched on several key themes in Marx’s reflections on the United States. He very much saw socialism not as a doctrine that must be imported to enlighten the ignorant US workers but, rather, as something arising organically out of the realities of American capitalism and society, inherent in experience and perceptions and struggles of US workers, and also logically developing out of American democracy. This was so much the case that he viewed modern socialism as being, in part, a product of the American experience. He saw certain blockages to the development of mass socialist consciousness within the growing working class – particularly the existence of slavery before 1865, and also the availability of so much land that would provide many labourers with opportunities to avoid wage-slavery and with hopes for relatively prosperity within the capitalist order. He also felt that these obstacles would be cleared away, after which socialist consciousness would flourish within the growing US working class. He also anticipated important alliances of the radicalising labour movement with poor farmers, as well as with oppressed African-Americans.

While Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling more or less shared Marx’s general orientation, and especially believed that socialism would naturally

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and organically evolve within the consciousness of US workers, it was Engels who added significantly new elements to Marx’s analysis. In particular, he identified three additional obstacles to the development of a strong socialist movement in the United States, although two of these involved an extension of issues identified by Marx: the possibility of relative prosperity for workers provided by free land in the 1840s was now being provided by industrial development (with high tariffs and rising productivity), and the fragmentation of those who toiled – even as the divergence of slave-labour and wage-labour was ended by the Civil War – by a racial and ethnic diversity that tended to fragment the working class. More than this, Engels had concluded that the way US democracy was structured (and limited) constituted not something that would logically and naturally flow into socialism but, instead, as something that would tend to block such a development.

Kautsky felt a new concern to combat the idea that American realities would seem to make socialism unnecessary, and he also was concerned to polemicise in favour of revolutionary socialism (and ‘socialist trade unionism’) in the face of a strong reformist challenge that had arisen within the socialist movement. When one reviews the additional points he makes (partly building on ideas of Engels), one is struck by the dramatic shift that his thinking represents for the Marxist movement. He gives significant attention to the ethnic/racial diversity which – he argues – weakens the US working class, and he comments that the relative prosperity has had the effect of inculcating among workers a narrow pragmatism rather than a heroic romanticism which he finds more common among workers in Europe. He emphasises how strong the capitalist class is in the United States, although he expresses the view that the proletariat would, in the foreseeable future, become stronger yet. He sees a relative prosperity enjoyed by only a minority of the workers, but he seems to conclude that – rather than fragmenting the working class between the more and the less privileged – this will propel the working class as a whole toward socialism. While much of Kautsky’s article may strike one as less coherent and compelling than what one would expect from Marx, it is unambiguously articulated within a revolutionary-Marxist framework, and it is graced with a critical-minded ‘openness’ that places it above the contributions of his US contemporaries.

Those post-Kautsky theorists following the current within his approach that is ‘open’ (non-fatalist) – far from providing a sense of positive or negative inevitabilities – wrestled with issues of ‘exceptionalism’, universality, and
global relevance in the American experience. Far more than Kautsky, some of them considered elements of socialism latent in working-class experience and consciousness. Some identified aspects of ‘race’ and racism that in some ways have obstructed and in other ways have furthered radicalisation within the working class. A few have also stressed the centrality of developments in the labour process that have undermined but also sharpened aspects of the class struggle. Greater attention has been given to issues of culture and consciousness, as well as to the debasement of democracy in the United States (with diverse views on how this impacts on class consciousness and class struggle).

The most capable of such post-Kautsky analysts have comprehended all such things as part of a contradictory totality in the process of change – with the outcome of such change not determined in advance. The outcome is dependent on the interpenetration of ‘subjective’ elements (the consciousness and the actions of revolutionaries, workers, the oppressed) with the ‘objective’ realities of US capitalism. And this recognition of the profound importance of the ‘subjective’ relates to something emphasised more than once by Kautsky at his best (in this case, in ‘The American Worker’):

Nothing . . . is more suitable to the spiritual development of man than revolutionary thought, because nothing can give him a more lofty purpose. . . .

Finally, because he always has the entire society in view, he recognises more clearly the great lines of demarcation that separate the different classes, in spite of all the points of contact between them; he understands the significance and tasks of the struggles of his class more clearly, and is able to give them greater resolution and unity of purpose.

It is this commitment that can be utilised to grasp more completely the explanation for (in order to overcome) the absence of socialism in the United States.

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(our task is) . . . to seek out the causes which irresistibly set in motion the last uprising and which, simultaneously, led to its failure; causes which are not to be sought in accidental efforts, talents, personal faults, errors, or in the betrayals of this or that leader, but in the general social situation and in the conditions of existence of each of the countries affected by the revolutionary agitation.

F. Engels, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany*

I. First approximations

To begin an essay on the global significance, in the United States, of the relationship of American labour militancy to politics, (and one, moreover, ultimately focused on the shift from the IWW to the CIO), with a discussion of the role of religion in American history may, at first, seem strange. And, while America is certainly one of the most strangely religious countries\(^1\) in the ‘advanced capitalist world’ (to use a certain

\(^1\) Cf. for example W.D. Burnham’s chart, based on the 1976 Gallup Poll study of the correlation between religious beliefs and the level of different countries’ social development in the essay ‘The 1980 Earthquake’ in Ferguson 1981, p. 135.
problematic formulation), religion as such has never (except in the South) weighed very heavily on the history of the American working class. One might, indeed, locate the IWW in particular in a ‘native American’ radical tradition that does in fact have roots in radical-Reformation politics. But religion is used here as a symptom of something else that does indeed weigh heavily on the history of the American working class, namely the role of the state, and state formation, in US history. Writers on American workers’ movements in modern industrial capitalism (or even in ‘postmodern’, ‘postindustrial’ capitalism) do not often consider that premodern, pre-industrial history importantly shapes the context in which such movements arise. One need only think of the dynamics of race and three centuries of white supremacy in American history to realise that industrial capitalism (for American purposes, post-1840s) was hardly a tabula rasa from which class politics appeared (or, more often, was submerged) and that many premodern, precapitalist developments are ‘recomposed’ for industrial contexts as much as they are obliterated by them, as earlier ‘modernisation’ schemas tended to assume. American state formation was, in fact, deeply influenced, (and not surprisingly), by developments in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. The embroilment of religious issues with the establishment of a bourgeois-capitalist society in England in the seventeenth century had possibly more long-term consequences in America than it ultimately did in England itself. The settlement of the issues posed by the Tudor and then Stuart state, and the established

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2 The ambiguity of the term is its imprecision – about exactly what ‘advanced capitalism’ is advanced in?
3 Although, by the by, Dubofsky’s standard history ‘We Shall Be All’: The History of the Industrial Workers of the World (1969) does, in passing, locate the IWW in the tradition of American radical Protestantism. More important is the Autobiographical Novel of Kenneth Rexroth (1964, 1991). Rexroth, who was a member of the IWW, joined the newly-founded Communist Party in 1919 and left in 1920, is an indispensable source on the link between the radical Reformation and the ‘native’ American radical tradition: ‘Emma Goldman points out in her autobiography that the pietistic sects in America have produced an unusually large number of radicals, reformers and revolutionaries. The specific sectarian religion dies out; the radical ethical social impulse endures and produces secular revolutionaries’ (p. 3).
4 Fingleton 1999 provides an excellent critique of the concept of ‘postindustrial society’, particularly the American case.
5 Cf. Cash 1940 for a classic analysis of how an agrarian ideology is remade for industrial development, in this case for the American South from the 1870s onward.
6 Lazare 1996 provides massive material on the Tudor origins of American political thought.
7 Which, while having important absolutist characteristics, was never fully absolutist in the continental sense.
church of that state, before capitalism fully emerged from mercantilism, in England or, by extension in America, meant that neither the confrontation with absolutism nor with a state religion was significant in completing the shift from mercantilism to capitalism in the US. On the contrary: in contrast to the constitution of a ‘civil society’ through the actions of the absolutist state, as occurred in varying degrees on the continent, civil society in the US had to create a state. The overall result was that the deep anti-clericalism which animated liberal, radical and socialist movements – always within a strictly Enlightenment framework – in Europe through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, never developed in America. Radical-Protestant currents (Anabaptists, Mennonites, Quakers) initiated and predominated in anti-slavery agitation in the American colonies and in the newly-independent US well before secular Enlightenment forces became seriously involved. In the Great Awakening of the 1740s, in the Jacksonian era, in abolitionism and in populism, Protestant ideologies played no small role, and hardly a conservative one. Such phenomena had their parallels in working-class Methodism in England, but no continental counterpart. The role of Catholicism similarly weighs significantly (and in this instance in conservative fashion) on the episodic relationship to worker radicalism of many of the Catholic (Irish, Slavic, Italian) immigrants that constituted a growing portion of the urban industrial working class from the 1840s onward, at the same time that, in their countries of origin, radical and socialist anti-clericalism was recruiting newly-proletarianised peasants to socialist politics and parties.

Having established the very peculiar nature of American civil society relative to its European counterparts in the first half of the nineteenth century, when

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8 Ignatiev 1995. Ignatiev is, of course, dealing with the paradigmatic case of immigrant adaptation to the colour-caste system of white supremacy within the American working class, and not with the role of Catholicism per se. I might point out at this juncture that the core of this essay was worked out in 1983, before the groundswell of research that put the race question in the center of American working-class formation, and of which Ignatiev’s book is probably the nec plus ultra (although cf. also Theodore Allen’s two-volume study The Invention of the White Race). In 1983, I was still a ‘colour-blind’ Marxist, which in the US means a blind Marxist. That said, I think that the core analysis presented here remains valid, although incomplete without a serious integration of the race question.

9 It is notorious, and significant, that in the 1912 US elections the Jewish proletariat of New York’s Lower East Side voted overwhelmingly for the Socialist candidate Eugene Debs, whereas the Irish working class in nearby Hell’s Kitchen gave only 3% of its vote to Debs. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass, similarly, contrasting the radicalism of the Irish in Ireland with their racist opposition to blacks in the US, asked somewhere ‘How can they be so good over there and so bad over here?’
British capitalism exercised uncontested industrial hegemony in the (very limited) capitalist world then in existence, the investigation turns to the consequences of the US anomaly in the decade of the 1860s and especially after the depression of 1873, when, for the first time, a series of industrial competitors, led by the US and Germany, began to undermine British supremacy. The rise of the US and Germany at the expense of Britain (and, to a lesser extent, of France) was, moreover, not merely a repetition of early capitalist industrialisation, but the passage to a new, ‘intensive’ (or ‘Taylorised’) form of capital accumulation, succeeding the early ‘extensive’ primitive accumulation by which British industry was built. But, of the five major countries – the US, Germany, Italy, Japan and Russia – which, in the 1860s, revamped their social relations for their respective entries into the world market, the US alone managed to do so with the same ‘Tudor polity’ established in pre- and early industrial days. Thus, the emerging working-class movement in the US, like the earlier revolution which established capitalism, did not confront so much a central state authority but more diffuse and dispersed local forms of public and private power. In the absence of such a state, the American working class had a far more difficult time defining itself politically on a national (not to mention international) level.

Thus the basic thesis presented here is that no major working-class political party developed in the US in the twentieth century because, in the US, in contrast to all other major capitalist countries, capitalism made the transition to the intensive (‘Taylorist’ or ‘Fordist’) phase of accumulation without requiring the participation of a working-class political party in the state.

Beginning in the 1970s, innovations in historical writing known as the ‘new social history’ raised serious and legitimate questions about earlier treatments of labour movements, focused as they tended to be on institutions such as political parties and trade unions, and on the ideologies and biographies of the more prominent leaders of those institutions. Thus, historical research shifted away from the earlier patterns to in-depth monographs treating the reproduction of the daily life of specific groups of workers in specific places and times, with an instinctive mistrust of ‘histoire événementielle’ as it is called by the French Annales school. But, while accepting the admonitions of the new social history that it is indeed not the millwheel which makes the river flow, the focus here rejects an approach which turns so totally away from a recognition of sharp breaks in the ‘macro’ spheres of society, politics and economics, or the reflection of such breaks in political and social institutions,
and in the ideas of those who articulate their aspirations. Certain things seemed possible to English workers before the dispersion of Chartism in 1848 that did not seem possible thereafter, in the same way that the Paris June days of the same year closed certain options to French workers and opened others. The question posed by this essay, namely why a political party espousing Marxian socialism never took root in the United States, leads, of necessity, to the realm of both institutions and ideas and cannot be answered simply by considering the history of hod carriers in Troy, New York, or by the mere multiplication of similar studies of similar groups of workers, however useful such research might be for answering this question in a meaningful way.

To refer to a ‘working-class political party espousing Marxian socialism’ is neither to advocate institutional history nor, still less, the history of ideas. The focus here is neither a study of the history of American Marxism, nor the history of the American labour movement as such. One can refuse to explain the failure, to date, of socialism in the US or in other countries by the fact that the workers, or their leaders, ‘had the wrong ideas’, and still insist that ideologies, as expressions of certain kinds of social practice, play a role in history. Bernsteinian reformism in the German SPD from 1898 onward (to take one well-known example) was obviously an ideology expressing a practice already well entrenched within the German party; that practice continued to make headway after 1898 even as it was voted down again and again at party congresses, until August 1914 brought about a day of reckoning. Marx’s analysis of the capitalist mode of production and the possibility of its abolition in a higher form of social relations is a very specific one; its serious espousal within a capitalist society means one kind of practice and programme, and its abandonment or relegation to window-dressing by a political movement or party means something else. Marx was very clear in insisting that communism was

in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer . . . [but merely expressed] . . .

actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from an historical movement going on under our very eyes.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} Marx and Engels 1967, pp. 95–6.
Certain types of movements express themselves through certain institutions and ideologies; other types of movements express themselves through other institutions and ideologies. Thus we hardly accord historical primacy to institutions or ideas – indeed, as it will be seen, quite the contrary – by insisting on the importance of the appearance or non-appearance of Marxian socialism as a working-class ideology in a specific country; to so insist is to show at the level of ideology the self-articulation of what a movement is, the depth and limits of its practice within a given society. The capitalist world has known many cases of working-class political parties that are explicitly non-Marxist or anti-Marxist, as in the British and Commonwealth Labour Parties, or the Social Democracies of Scandinavia and the Benelux countries. In the US, Marxism has occupied a marginal position in political life and there is no self-styled working-class party whatsoever. By comparing the experience of the American working class to that of countries in which either working-class political parties, or Marxism, or both, were important, one can identify more precisely the practice of the social movement of a specific class in the national specificity of a dynamic that is global, a dynamic that can be seized neither at the level of institutions, nor ideas, nor by local social histories that, a priori, are indifferent to the existence of such a global dynamic, and ruptures within it. That dynamic, for the purposes of this essay, is constituted by the extensive and intensive phases of capital accumulation, and the transition from one to the other over the period 1870–1945.

What, then, are these national specificities of the United States? Numerous commentators, beginning with Tocqueville, have noted the unusual importance of religion in American life.11 But few, if any, have pinpointed the reason for this phenomenon, still less underscored its importance for the marginality of socialism in American history. For the perspective developed here, the first key to the nature of the American state and American politics, as they relate to the absence of a working-class party, is this: the foundations of American political culture were laid down, within the larger context of the Anglo-American world of the seventeenth century, in an historical period – the last – in which the bourgeois-capitalist revolution could still speak the language of religion.

This reality is visible in a persistent thread of American history, from the Puritans of 1620 to the Great Awakening of 1740 to similar cyclical occurrences

from the 1820s, right up to the emergence and consolidation of the Christian Right from the late 1970s to the present. Writers from as divergent perspectives as Lazare and Huntington, it is true, have characterised the American state as a ‘Tudor polity’, referring to the maze of informal and formal types of countervailing power and the absence of a single strong authority, and many authors have discussed a ‘dissident Protestantism’ that dominated American culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But few, if any, of these characterisations fully capture the significance of the timing of the formation of the American polity relative to that of other countries.

To say that the roots of American political discourse are to be found in a period in which the bourgeois-capitalist revolution could still speak the language of religion is, of course, to refer to the English Revolutions of 1640 and 1688. Of particular interest here is the situation of the radical phase of that revolution in the late 1640s, within the larger context of European power politics as they were fought out in the final phase of the wars of religion: the Thirty Years’ War in Germany, ending with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, coincided with the consolidation of the Bourbon state after the failure of the Fronde in France and the end of the high tide of the ‘millenarian’ Protestant phase of the English Revolution represented by currents such as the Levellers, Diggers and Ranters. 1648 marked the symbolic end of the Renaissance-Reformation ideologies in Europe; more than a century of warfare under the banners of religion had ultimately undermined absolute claims by any side, so much had the issues of Protestantism vs. Catholicism been sullied by pragmatic affairs of state, perhaps best summarised by Henri IV’s famous 1584 remark that ‘Paris is well worth a mass’. 1648 also marked the consolidation, for an entire historical epoch, of the hegemony of England, Holland and France at the cutting edge of capitalist development, and the relegation of the previously central German and Mediterranean spheres to the status of underdevelopment relative to the North-Atlantic economies. Because of the successful struggle against absolutist proclivities (but never full-blown absolutism in the French sense) in both the English Revolution’s attempt to

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12 Lazare 1996; Huntington 1968, Chapter 2.
13 A fundamental aspect of the American ideology is the ‘Adamic’ myth of the founding without prior history; instead of situating that myth in a global context, most American historical writing reflects it, by serious or systematic neglect of the international situation at every major turn of American history. Cf. Marienstras 1976.
14 Obviously, the key sources here are the many historical works of Christopher Hill.
subdue the monarchy and in the Dutch revolt against Spain, the absolutist-mercantilist state which, after its consolidation in France extended its influence across Europe to Prussia, Austria, Russia, Spain and Portugal, never fully took hold in the two countries – England and Holland – which fought out the battle for world capitalist hegemony in the seventeenth century, a battle which tilted toward England around mid-century as well. The significance of this combined demise of the total claims of religion on political life and of the mercantilist-absolutist state in economic life was that the new ideologies of Enlightenment emerging from the scientific revolutions of the mid-seventeenth century were never compelled, in England, to do direct battle with the kind of Enlightened absolutist state with which rationalist and then Enlightenment philosophies became enmeshed on the continent. Readers of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* remember his summary of the English Revolution:

> in the same way but at a different stage of development, Cromwell and the English people had borrowed for their bourgeois revolution the language, passions and illusions of the Old Testament. When the actual goal had been reached, when the bourgeois transformation of English society had been accomplished, Locke drove out Habbakuk.  

Locke’s epistemological empiricism, with its deep distrust of the suprasensuous domain of conceptual generality, and Locke’s political pluralism were developed directly in the shadow the just-concluded European religious wars and English Revolution, and its subordination of the monarchy to parliamentary controls. A century later, the French Revolution was as far from the ‘language, passions and illusions of the Old Testament’ as the deductive-geometric philosophies of Descartes or Spinoza were from Lockean empiricism and pluralism. Yet it was precisely the latter which gave its characteristic stamp to subsequent English, and then American liberal social thought. (In America, moreover, Locke fused with Habakkuk.)

Similarly, when comparing nascent English and French writers on political economy of the late seventeenth century, what is immediately striking as the difference between the mercantilism of a Petty or a Mun and that of French figures such as Sully and Colbert is that English mercantilism is already preoccupied essentially with the problems of gold, trade and a favourable

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16 Wood 1991 puts Locke into his historical and political context, and also highlights the importance of the agrarian revolution.
balance of payments – the classic mercantilist themes – whereas French thought, in addition to these problems, is completely engrossed by the problem of the statist promotion of infrastructure, taxation, and what today would be called the ‘capitalisation of agriculture’.$^{17}$ The latter were not, by the late seventeenth century, problems for England, because these tasks had already been accomplished in the course of English social history from the late fourteenth century onward.$^{18}$ Whereas, in the late eighteenth century, Adam Smith could advocate as policy the dismantling of mercantilist economic forms to allow English capitalism to emerge in full flower, in France, the destruction of mercantilism required a world-historical revolution against both the paradigmatic absolutist state and its established religion. In England, the social stranglehold of both the absolutising (Tudor and Stuart) state and the Anglican Church had been broken long before. Because, in England, the bourgeois-capitalist revolution was made in the period in which it was still possible, indeed necessary, to ‘borrow the language, passions and illusions of the Old Testament’; when, later, ‘Locke drove out Habbakuk’, the English Enlightenment$^{19}$ was spared the long agony of the ancien régime on the continent and the battles, both political and ideological, against the absolutist state and its established church. From that situation to Tocqueville’s remark that the absence of a state religion in America paradoxically made religion a far more important force in social life (and more a private affair) than elsewhere, there is only a step.

These realities deeply marked American development. They made it possible (once again), for social ferment (including radical social ferment) to adapt the language of the Old Testament to revival movements from the 1740s, by way of the 1820s prelude to Jacksonian democracy, the abolitionist agitation against slavery to the populist agitation against urban capitalism and Wall-Street finance. (Such language, moreover, was hardly absent from the black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.) Halevy and Thompson noted similar phenomena, such as the role of Methodism in the early working-class movement, in England, but, once again, this role of religion in nineteenth-century democratic social ferment has no counterpart on the Continent. Later,

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$^{18}$ Cf. Aston and Philpin (eds.) 1985 for the discussion of the capitalisation of agriculture in England.

$^{19}$ Jacob 1991 and other works, show the ‘enthusiast’ tradition inspired by the radical Reformation against which Locke was also polemicising.
with the formation of an actual industrial working-class in the northeastern US, the absence of any anti-clerical tradition in American liberalism and radicalism made it possible for Catholic peasant immigrants to develop local Catholic ‘island communities’, deeply involved with the church, when their working-class contemporaries in the counties from which they came were going over to the anti-clericalism of liberal, radical and later socialist agitation.

There seems, therefore, to be a deep relationship between the entrenched historical traditions of an absolutist state and state religion and the subsequent rise of Marxism in the working-class movement. Without anticipating the argument, there is a near-perfect correlation, internationally, between the presence of important Communist parties (leaving aside the somewhat different question of Eastern Europe 1945–89), and a deep-rooted tradition of Enlightened absolutisms in such countries as France, Spain, Italy and Portugal, and the presence of non-Marxist social-democratic working-class parties in all northern European countries where absolutism either did not exist or where it was dismantled relatively early (as in Sweden). Finally, in the United States, where there was never an Enlightened absolutism, early or late, dismantled or entrenched, there was neither a significant Communist nor social-democratic party.

Thus the unusual significance of religion in American life was not the cause of the absence of socialism, but rather symptomatic of a set of dispensations involving the state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries relative to countries in which socialism did arise. One can thus amend Louis Hartz’s 1950s formulation of ‘no feudalism, no socialism’ (‘feudalism’ being a very ambiguous term where seventeenth-century Europe is concerned) to ‘no absolutism, no socialism’, grasped comparatively and internationally, in both the development of capitalism and of the working-class movement in various countries. For, historically, every working-class movement has borne the birthmarks of the bourgeois revolution in its national sector. This has often been observed, but it is useful to focus on why that should be the case. In

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20 The countries of the ex-Soviet bloc, from the Baltic states to Rumania, had after all undergone some influence of Swedish, Russian, Prussian and Austrian absolutism.

21 Todd 1990 makes a similar correlation between agrarian development and the appearance of twentieth-century Communist parties.

22 Because of the belated national unification, the story of Enlightened absolutism in Italy played out regionally, under Habsburg domination in its Spanish and then Austrian moments.

23 In Hartz 1955.
every European country, from England to Russia, the decisive stamp of a particular country’s working-class movement is determined by the moment at which it separated itself from the bourgeois-liberal movement against the ancien régime, that is, when class antagonism within the ‘Third Estate’ became paramount. For this determines the exact point at which the working class stands alone and fights for nothing other than its own demands. It is at this moment that the working class directly confronts the state and the armed forces of the state, and acquires its political ideas. In most countries in western Europe, this occurred in 1848; the Chartist movement in England, but, most importantly, the uprising of the Parisian working class in the June Days, marked the first time in the history of the movement of bourgeois-liberal emancipation that the working class discovered in practice, on a national scale, that its sole enemy was not the ancien régime. This is not to say that, after 1848, the working class never again fought to realise an extension of the bourgeois revolution; quite the contrary, as will be shown. Indeed, it has been the failure of most twentieth- (and now twenty-first-) century Marxism to understand the extent to which ‘Marxist’ political parties, particularly of the Second-International variety, drew their real force precisely from the battle to complete the uprooting of the precapitalist ancien régime which has blinded many analysts to the failure of Marxism in different countries. Thus, to more closely approximate the thesis presented here: the historical role of ‘Marxism’ to date has been that of a ‘substitute bourgeois revolution’ in countries where the indigenous bourgeois forces have been too weak to complete the uprooting of the precapitalist ancien régime, and that, the stronger the precapitalist ancien régime forces are, the stronger ‘Marxism’ is.

To put the matter in a slightly different way: aside from the rather special cases of England and Holland, two of the countries which emerged hegemonic

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24 It is highly significant that, in the US, 1848 marks the explosion of previously dominant Jacksonian democracy over the question of slavery, indicating once again the centrality of race in the definition of class in US experience.

25 Mayer 1981 provides material for demonstrating that Europe as late as 1914 was far from fully capitalist. The problem of Mayer’s book is a kind of political-institutional bias that diverts him from the question of whether capitalism had already broken the bonds holding it back from becoming the exclusive mode of production. Mayer also does not make a connection to a critique of pre-1914 European socialism as being ‘insufficiently socialist’ because the social milieu in which it operated was insufficiently capitalist.

26 This analysis, following the remarks in the previous footnote, provide the framework for a concrete explanation of the uncanny resemblance of Second-International ‘vulgar Marxism’ to eighteenth-century mechanical materialism, serving the same bourgeois-revolutionary ends.
from the era of religious wars, in every continental European country, the Enlightened absolutist state played a central role in the constitution of a civil (bourgeois) society, just as, in an earlier era, the Tudor state had played this role in England itself. But, in the United States alone, civil society had to constitute a state.

One need only think of the Prussian reforms of 1808–13, that very mild ‘French Revolution from above’, in which the Enlightened civil service forced through the capitalisation of land, tax reforms and reductions of aristocratic control of the Prussian military, in order to see a prototypical case of a state creating a civil society. In the United States, on the other hand, the ‘Tudor polity’ that emerged from the postrevolutionary effort to create a state (and which was deeply rooted in prerevolutionary colonial history) made the central political authority far more elusive than it was in continental Europe. Thus, after the Civil War, when the capital-labour antagonism finally erupted in American life, the Federal government never directly confronted the entire working population in a ‘class against class’ situation on a national scale, as occurred in France in 1848 and 1871, or, in less dramatic but still quite antagonistic fashion, in Germany in 1848 or with the Anti-Socialist Laws of 1878–90. Thus, paradoxically, the European working classes after 1848 became politically independent of bourgeois-liberal currents precisely to further and complete the bourgeois revolutions against the ancien régime, however far it was from their conscious intent while, in the US, the working class was politically contained by bourgeois-liberal forces because there was no ancien régime, and hence only capitalists, to combat.

Thus the ‘spectre haunting Europe’ on the eve of 1848, which was, in the Paris, Berlin and Vienna working-class actions of that year at least powerful enough to convince the bourgeoisie of the existence of ‘communism’ as a real force, really came to the US only in the 1870s, when confrontations such as they occurred in St. Louis and Pittsburgh in 1877 could be characterised as an American ‘Paris Commune’ in the bourgeois press.\footnote{Slotkin 1985, pp. 482–3 and ff.} Prior to this period, Marxism was largely if not exclusively the ideology of some of the German ‘48ers’ who came to the US after the defeat of the 1848 revolutions in Central Europe, and remained until the 1890s more of an immigrant subculture than a real force in the working class, to the point that Engels, during his visit to the US, had to argue with German-American immigrant socialists about the
advocacy of putting out a newspaper in English. In the case of these German-American immigrants, the Marxist (or more accurately social-democratic) influence in northern cities such as Chicago and Milwaukee laid the foundation for the municipal or ‘sewer’ socialism (once again borrowed from Central-European social-democratic models) that actually produced a wave of socialist mayors in the 1900-12 period and which became the social base for the right wing of the American Socialist Party on the eve of World War I. A similar phenomenon recurred with the inability of the Russian Jewish immigrants who embraced Bolshevism after 1917 to ever effectively break out of a later Marxist immigrant subculture.

II. Specific consequences of the absence of the absolutist state and established church for the American working-class movement

In Western European countries, the formation of specific national working classes occurred in tandem with the expulsion of the peasantry from the land and the more general separation of all petty producers from their means of production. This was also true of the United States, but with a difference. A significant part of the dispossessed agrarian populations which arrived in US factories from the 1840s, and particularly the 1870s onward, came not from indigenous rural areas but from the impoverished countrysides of Europe. The descendants of these populations, which were recruited from the Catholic peasantry of the most backward regions of Western, then of Southern and Eastern Europe (Ireland, southern Italy, Poland) make up the bulk of the white working-class population in the US today. The industrial cities (or, more accurately, their surviving shells) of the northeastern US constitute a veritable archaeology of successive layers of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigration. Other rural populations were recruited to US industry at different stages of its development: the indigenous Protestant farmer population of the East, Midwest and later the South; German ‘48ers who

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28 On the German-American Marxists, cf. Herreshoff 1967, pp. 53–78. Similarly, in 1919, it took a direct intervention of the Comintern to enforce English, and not Russian, as the official language of the newly-founded American Communist Party.

29 The factional situation of the SP on the eve of the war is described in Weinstein 1967.

30 See the description of the early congresses of the American Communist Party-to-be in Draper 1957.
entered the skilled trades in the Midwest; Jewish workers and artisans from Eastern Europe, from the 1860s until 1924; beginning in the 1890s, black labour from the deep South. After World War II, the Catholic working class of the industrial Northeast was joined by further influxes of black labour from the South and by Latin-American and Caribbean agrarian populations. But, if we consider the groups that made up the industrial working class of 1900, it is striking that, while most of the German, Jewish and indigenous Protestant layers, from whom the bulk of the militant organisers, radicals and socialists came, moved through the working class in the course of the twentieth century, the Catholic working class remained in industry until the large-scale restructurings and downsizings of the 1970s and 1980s.

Any merely ‘cultural’ or cultural-religious theory of the formation of socialist consciousness in the American working class which identifies the Catholic populations as the most conservative must, once again, necessarily founder on the radically different course followed by the working classes in their predominantly Catholic countries of origin. The Irish, Polish and Italian working classes of the 1890–1914 period, in the Dublin general strike of 1913, the Polish mass strikes of 1905, and the Italian ‘Red Week’ of 1914 were each, in their way, at the cutting edge of the international working-class movement of the period. Indeed, the Lawrence (Massachusetts) strike of 1912 and the US Steel Strike of 1919 were notable in their success in mobilising these same immigrant groups. But, whether one considers the history of the American Socialist Party, the IWW, the Socialist Labor Party or the Communist Party, it is immediately clear that the Catholic immigrant groups were never affected by working-class radicalism in more than a transitory way. The internal histories of the SP, CP or even of current which formed the smaller (Trotskyist) Socialist Workers’ Party (currents which played a decisive role in the Minneapolis Teamsters strike of 1934 as well as the Toledo Auto-Lite strike of the same year) reveal important clashes between, first, the Midwestern populist radicalism and German ‘sewer socialism’ (as it culminated in the battle between John Reed and SP moderates in the debate over the Russian Revolution) and, then, the same Midwest radicalism and the Russian-Jewish working-class tradition, first in the founding of the CPUSA in 1919–20, and, on a smaller scale, in the split between the Cannon and Shachtman factions

\[31\] Draper 1957, pp. 176–84.
of the SWP in 1939–40. But, in these internal battles of organised political parties, it is the Catholic working class that is noticeable by its absence.

The source of the imperviousness of American Catholic working-class populations to Marxist ideas of either the social-democratic or Communist variety, before and after World War I, must be sought – given the successes of those ideas in their countries of origin – in the specific adaptation of these groups to American life. And any study of that adaptation – which, of course, goes beyond the framework of this essay – must focus on the Catholic Church in organising the immigrant populations, the absence of any anti-clerical tradition in American radicalism (as discussed previously), and the role of the Democratic Party machines which arose by the 1840s and established civil-service power bases and roads of mobility for Irish and Italian workers in the US Northeast. The cycles of ‘good government’ campaigns undertaken by upper middle-class Protestant Progressives and similar configurations against the corruption of these machines (which was real enough) from New York at the turn of the century to the anti-corruption drives aimed at the Italian machines of northern New Jersey in the late 1960s might well be understood as a muted class struggle against the bastions of Catholic working-class power, but a class struggle precisely integrated in the structures of the Democratic Party and never fought out as such. The specific ethno-religious adaptation to American life by successive waves of Catholic immigrants constituted both the ‘particularist’, quasi-corporatist solution for one or another group, but at the same time bred precisely the vicious parochialism and outright hostility to socialism (for instance, the role of the Catholic Church in the McCarthy period) which has, to date, always prevented these sections of the working class from uniting in a serious way with the white and black Protestant, as well as Jewish working-class strata far more open to radicalism.

In the fate of the Catholic working class in the northeastern US, we see in rather sharp fashion the long-range consequences of the two phenomena analysed as specific to the US in Section I: the special role of religion resulting from the absence of an absolutist experience and an established church. The absence of the first made possible a kind of political solution that deprived the working-class movement of a sharp focus for its political energies in the crazy quilt of American politics; the presence of the latter, in most of Catholic Europe, produced anti-clerical movements linked to radicalism and socialism. A further piece in this puzzle is provided when we consider the historical ‘archaeology’ of US immigration, and that it is precisely from these regions
of Europe where the absolutist tradition was weak or primarily associated with foreign occupation – Ireland, Poland, Sicily – that this immigration came. A strange historical symmetry emerges in which the European populations least tempered in the historical experiences that elsewhere produced socialist movements came to a country whose traditions were notable by the absence of those same experiences.

III. The American Civil War in the international conjuncture of the 1860s

As with most major periods of American history, most writing on the Civil War sees it as a more or less strictly ‘American’ phenomenon, with other international actors merely serving as a relevant but strictly secondary backdrop. A comparable abstraction of American history from world history ignores the context linking the young republic to the international situation produced by the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, or the location of the Jacksonian period within the larger context of the French Revolution of 1830, the English Reform Bill of 1832, and the post-1830 revival of liberal agitation in Metternich’s Central Europe. But neither of these habitual omissions is quite so distorting as the failure to see the US Civil War within the broader framework of world capitalism in the 1860s, with important consequences for the subsequent development of the American labour movement.

While Barrington Moore’s characterisation of the Civil War as the ‘last capitalist revolution’ may be a bit too grandiose,\(^{32}\) it certainly captures the significance of the Civil War as the opening of the untrammelled development of capitalism in the US. And Moore is unusual, almost singular, in placing, within the larger texture of his book, the American Civil War squarely within the context of a decade that also saw the final unification of Germany (1862–70), the unification of Italy (1860), the abolition of serfdom in Russia (1861) and the Meiji Restoration in Japan (1868). To Moore’s framework, one might add another dimension (which falls outside the perspective of his book): the world depression of 1873, inaugurating a quarter century of what various economic historians have called a ‘great depression’, the ‘great deflation’,\(^{33}\) or, in

\(^{32}\) Moore 1966, Chapter 3. It was rather the last capitalist revolution that openly spoke the language of capitalism.

\(^{33}\) See Rosenberg 1967, Chapter 1 for a discussion of various theories of conjuncture explaining the post-1873 depression.
Kondratiev’s language, a period (1873–96) in which the ‘tonic’ is one of recession and depression in contrast to the worldwide boom period of 1850–73. For reasons to be enumerated momentarily, the structural reforms of the 1860s and the depression of 1873 closed one period of capitalist development and opened another one, and the full significance of the US Civil War must be located within this ‘phase change’.

The deep depression of 1837, which inaugurated the so-called ‘Hungry Forties’ in the US, was followed by another international downturn in 1846–7, the immediate prelude to the European revolutions of 1848. It should first of all be remembered that the industrial world prior to 1848 included little more than England, northern France, Belgium and the northeastern United States. The 1848 revolutions and subsequent boom years of ‘high tonic’ over the 1850–73 period (interrupted internationally by world slumps in 1857–8 and 1866) changed all that, making the industrial revolution irreversible in Germany and the US in particular. The five major structural reforms in the US, Germany, Italy, Russia and Japan in the 1860s were direct responses to this ‘capitalisation’ of social organisation for an increasingly unified world market, one which, by 1870, England had already been reduced from uncontested front runner to *primus inter pares* by German and US competition.

Adding for good measure the Bonapartist industrialisation in France in the same decade – one that was aborted after 1870–1 when the Commune made the French bourgeoisie recoil from the social spectre that industrialisation had conjured up – what can be observed is a statist response to English industrial hegemony and varying forms for the acceleration of ‘primitive accumulation’ of labour-power from agrarian sectors for industrialisation. One important statist element of this response in the US was the Northern tariff policy protecting US industries against British competition, in addition to the role of the state in uprooting the slave system in the South in 1865 and thereafter.

After 1873, both England and France, for different reasons, increasingly recede from the front ranks of industrial powers. In England, after 1870, the City of London increasingly recycled capital to more profitable direct investment abroad, and in France, as was mentioned, the bourgeois classes recoiled from the Paris Commune and opted for a patently Malthusian renunciation of

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34 See Rosenberg 1974, Chapter 1 for Rosenberg’s argument that 1857–9 was the first world depression.
35 This tradition is disinterred in Hudson 1975.
large-scale industrialisation. This is hardly to imply that England and France were at similar levels of industrialisation. But, with the exception of the Bonapartist interlude of the 1860s, France and England between 1815 and 1873 had in common the classical ‘laissez-faire’ phase of capitalism in which the state, while creating the social and economic conditions for accumulation, receded by comparison with its earlier mercantilist role or with the more directly interventionist role it would play in the twentieth century. After 1873, world capitalism, led by the US and Germany, began a transition to what Hilferding and others later characterised as ‘organised capitalism’. Thus it can hardly be surprising to see, in the five major national restructurings of the 1860s, the emergence of the five national powers which, in the world crisis of the 1930s, had recourse to further large-scale uses of the state, over and against England and France, where the earlier, liberal and laissez-faire arrangements hung on more tenaciously.  

In parallel fashion, the reorganisation of the world economy in the 1860s also moved the epicentre of international socialism, after the defeat of the Commune, from France to Germany, or from Proudhonism to an approximation of Marxism (more precisely, Lassalleanism).

Finally, it is necessary to complete this overview of the transition from the hegemony of liberal capitalism to the origins of what ‘organised capitalism’ (these terms will momentarily be given their precise structural definition as the phases of extensive and intensive capitalist accumulation). A further piece in this puzzle is the world agrarian crisis inaugurated by the depression of 1873. The English Corn Laws of 1846 had marked a milestone in international capitalist development, not only as a triumph of the classes deriving their income from industrial profit over those deriving their income from ground rent, but also as the triumph of an industrialisation process that had already freed the national economy from a large involvement of manual labour in agriculture and, most importantly, one that could import food from abroad. But such a state of affairs, like full industrialisation itself, remained confined to England in 1846. The US, with large-scale industry from the 1870s onward, was still financing its industrialisation as an exporter of raw materials into

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36 This is hardly to imply that, by 1937–8, England and France had not reflated along the emerging ‘Keynesian’ paradigm; merely that they had already been pushed from front-rank status, increasingly buffeted by larger forces instead of shaping them.

37 This is a preferable term to the ‘monopoly capital’ of Hobson-Lenin coinage.
the 1890s, to give only one example. But the 1873 depression not only lowered the curtain on the ‘Anglo-French’ phase of capitalist development; it remade the conditions of the world agricultural market from top to bottom. Innovations in both agriculture and transport by the 1870s allowed the large-scale exporters of the US, Canada, Argentina, Australia and Russia to overwhelm the smaller, less productive agricultures of Western Europe. By 1890, it was cheaper to bring wheat from Argentina to many European ports than it was to ship it one hundred miles over inland transport. Setting aside the obvious impact of these developments on US domestic politics in the 1873–96 heyday of populism, one can underscore their more overarching impact on the formation of the American working class: i) the spur to the immigration of displaced peasants from the depressed agrarian sectors of Southern and Eastern Europe, and ii) the long-term cheapening of the wage bill of the industrial working class, reducing food as a portion of the worker’s consumption to a steadily lower percentage of the wage for the first time in the history of capitalism. These parallel developments gave American capitalism a reservoir of cheap labour for the entire period of its ascendancy to world hegemony from the 1880s onward.

This counterposition of two phases of capitalist development, centred on an ‘Anglo-French’ liberal capitalism of the 1815–73 period and that of US and German ascendancy after 1873, is the axis of the entire argument presented here. For, if it is in fact correct to see the decade of the 1860s of the five states – the US, Germany, Italy, Japan and Russia – which managed to emerge as rival industrial powers to England in the period prior to 1914, it can also be noted that these five states constituted the centres of the three major ‘models’ of 1930s crisis management which were presented as the supercession of the bankrupt ‘classical-liberal’ or Anglo-French phase of capitalism: the American New Deal, fascism, and Stalinism. The continuity with our argument about the role of Enlightened absolutism in fomenting conditions for the emergence of a working-class political party resides, first, in the prominent role of such top-down reform in the earlier histories of Germany, Russia and Japan. But, most important of all for the question of the fate of working-class politics in the US, is the fact that in the US alone, the transition to the supercession of Anglo-French liberal capitalism, carried out institutionally in 1933–45 but drawing significantly on antecedents from the Progressive Era and World War I state economic management, was carried out without the significant participation of a working-class political party in the capitalist state and the
use of ‘socialist’ ideology in the legitimation of that state.\textsuperscript{38} This happened because, in the US, capitalism encountering after 1865, no domestic obstacles whatever to its expansion, was able to carry out this transition on its own. By contrast, as already implied in our characterisation of the role of Marxism in other countries as far more an ideology of a ‘substitute bourgeois revolution’ serving to eliminate precapitalist social forces than in actually implementing socialism, this transition in Germany, Italy, Japan (and, in another fashion, in the special case of Stalinist Russia) had to draw on the support of socialist ideologies and ‘socialist’ political parties of the working class. In the same way that, in the US, the unusual role of religion in social life and its role even in democratic political movements (Jacksonian period, abolitionism) pointed to the very special origins of the American polity in the seventeenth century and the absence of any need to do battle with an absolutist state, the unusual marginality of socialism in American working-class history points to the special situation of US capitalism in the post-1873 international transition to ‘organised capitalism’.

It is now necessary to ground this transition in a structural-economic theory, however cursorily. For most of the 1815–73 period of capitalism, the major social role and source of accumulation for capitalism was in the violent process of ‘primitive accumulation’, the separation of various strata of petty producers (peasants, artisans) from their means of production and their enlistment in intensive industrial employment. The main social impact of this primitive accumulation, in the early industrial centres of capitalism England, northern France, Belgium and the northeastern US, was a net transformation of agrarian populations into industrial populations. This was the high phase of what economists and economic historians\textsuperscript{39} call the extensive phase of capitalist

\textsuperscript{38} In Germany, the SPD ruled alone or in coalitions at various times from 1918 to 1933, and aided the Allied powers in the marginalisation of the German Communist Party in the 1945–52 stabilisation of postwar Germany; in Italy (as in France and in Belgium) the Communist Party was in the government from 1944 to 1947 and was essential in persuading the wartime resistance movement to give up its arms and accept a ‘government of national reconstruction’; in Japan, both the JSP and JCP played a similar role, with the JSP in the government and the JCP supporting a broad ‘democratic alliance’ outside the government; finally, in Russia, an actual working-class revolution overturned the state and provided the subsequent Stalinist counterrevolution with an edifying ideology for the construction of ‘socialism in one country’. Less noted, but perhaps almost as significant, is the working-class and ‘socialist’ component of the interwar fascist ideologies of the state in Italy and Germany; cf. Roberts 1979, Kele 1972 and, most importantly, Faye 1972, pp. 641–77 on the crossover of Left and Right in the preparation of the Schachtian reflation after 1933.

\textsuperscript{39} Predoehl 1949, pp. 101–36 gives a good discussion of the distinction between
development; indeed, in various parts of the world, it continues today. But
the post-1873 rise of US and German capitalism, at the expense of earlier
industrial powers, above all England, was not merely a shift in the geographical
locus of an industrial process. It was, as alluded to earlier, also the shift to a
different, intensive, form of accumulation in which surplus generated by the
earlier process, while still important, was paralleled and ultimately overtaken,
beginning in the 1880s, by surplus from the qualitative technical intensification
of the capitalist production process itself. The most immediate and familiar
manifestation of this process was Taylorism, implemented in the US to expunge
the still-important role of craft skills in production wherever possible. It was
the phase of capitalist development which, in Marx’s terminology, reduced
concrete labour to its actually capitalist form of interchangeable abstract
labour.40

The significance of Taylorism has often been noted in the capitalism that
emerged from the 1873–96 ‘great deflation’. But this recomposition of the
worker at the point of production, though central, is only one aspect of a
deeper structural change then emergent, namely the recomposition of the
total working-class bill of consumption within capitalist accumulation. What
characterises the intensive phase of capitalist development is not merely
Taylorism at the workplace, but the appearance of mass consumer durables
and generally cheapened articles of consumption for the working class, for
the first time in capitalist history.41 The automobile, in production as in
consumption, is the paradigmatic commodity of this phase. The combination
of great increases in agricultural productivity which inaugurated the agrarian
depression of the 1870s, and the intensification of labour through Taylorist
methods and technical innovation in the production of light industrial consumer
durables made possible an increase in the material content of working-class
consumption while the working-class wage bill, as an increment of the total
capitalist expenditure in production, remained constant or declined. These

extensive and intensive accumulation and the post-1873 conjuncture as the turning
point between the two.

40 Marx develops the concepts of extensive and intensive capitalist development in
passing in the chapters treating absolute and relative surplus-value in Volume I of
Capital, but his summum on the subject, focused on parallel distinctions between the
formal and real subsumption of labour, is in the so-called ‘unpublished’ Chapter 6
of Capital, Volume I, ‘Results of the Immediate Capitalist Production Process’, which
is now available as an appendix to Marx 1973.

41 These concepts are applied to American economic and labour history by Aglietta
1979, pp. 131–5.
combined transformations of production and consumption, which emerged only sporadically in fits and starts, became dominant primarily in the US and in Germany in the 1920s, and finally became the axis of world accumulation after 1945, under US auspices. This change in the composition of the working class’s consumption through cheapened goods, starting with agricultural products, seems a much better (and more Marxist) explanation of Western working-class reformism than Lenin’s notion of crumbs made possible by imperialist super-profits.

Thus, once again, for purposes of analysing the role of the working class in politics, the argument to this point may be summarised as follows: the United States, in contrast to almost all other major capitalist countries, was able to enter the extensive phase of capital accumulation without recourse to an absolutist state; later, in the 1873–1945 period, the US was able to reorganise its domestic social and political institutions for the intensive phase of accumulation without recourse to the participation of a working-class political party in the state.

To understand more concretely the similarities and contrasts between the transition from extensive to intensive development in the US as compared to other countries, it is useful to consider the case of the other major country that first made that transition, Germany. Germany was, from 1870 to 1933, far more of a vanguard, in terms of social institutions, in this transition than the US. But this once again underscores the uniqueness of the American transition. In Germany, both absolutism and a working-class party were decisive. Germany, from the wars of liberation against Napoleon onward, had a mercantile development ideology, articulated from Fichte to List, which it counterposed to early nineteenth-century laissez-faire economics. This was, in turn, merely a transposition of the mercantilist (or cameralist) policies of the Prussian state in its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rise to great power status in Europe. Through the continuity of the Prussian civil service which had been decisive both in the pre-1789 mercantilist phase and in the ‘creation of a civil society from above’ in the Napoleonic period, Germany in 1850 and thereafter possessed a system of educational and research institutions oriented to technological innovation unknown anywhere else in the world, which, after Germany’s sudden eruption on the map of Europe

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42 It is, of course, ironic that List himself had been influenced by the statist-protectionist economics of the early nineteenth century in the US, namely Henry Carey and, before him, Alexander Hamilton.
in 1864–70, crowned by its military humiliation of France in 1870–1, became the envied model of all developing industrial countries, the postwar ‘Japan’ of its day (and Meiji Japan assiduously copied Prussian administrative techniques). The intensive phase of capitalist accumulation is characterised not merely by Taylorist scientific management; it is characterised just as much by direct appropriation of science to the production process itself, in contrast to the haphazard methods of earlier industrial development. In this realm, the Prussian system of technische Hochschulen and state research institutes was unrivalled, and the results, by the 1880s, were there for all to see in the German chemical, electronics and steel industries, as well as in scientific agriculture and military applications. Virtually the entire reform of US universities in the 1890s was based on the German model.43

But there is still more to the significance of this ‘German (or Prussian) development state’ for the phase of intensive capital accumulation. German cartel structures, and regulation thereof, were studied and copied in the US, beginning in the 1890s, and the US Congress looked to Germany’s Reichsbank as a model for the 1913 legislation creating the Federal Reserve Bank.44

Finally, and most directly underscoring the role of the working-class movement and what happened or not in the US, as opposed to other countries, Germany was the vanguard in the containment of a working-class political party and the enlistment of that party in its own state apparatus. The Social Democrat and statist reformer Lassalle made overtures to (and may have secretly met) Bismarck in the 1860s,45 and the Bismarckian state once again led the world in the innovation of health insurance and other welfare-state measures even as, from 1878 to 1890, the Social Democrats were banned from most political activity (although not from electoral participation in the Reichstag).

While the SPD was officially held at a distance from the state until 1914, Marx, in his 1875 ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ already saw in the Lassallean idea of a ‘people’s state’ a dangerous idea totally alien to his own theory, an idea, moreover, arguably an antecedent to the later ideology of

43 Veysey 1965, pp. 125–33.
44 The report of the Pujo Committee, established in 1908 to study the central bank question (after the panic of 1907), included a major discussion of the Reichsbank when it was published in 1911. Similarly, German workmen’s compensation was prominent in the Congressional hearings on that subject in the US in 1909; cf. Weinstein 1968, pp. 50–1.
45 Na’aman 1970, is the definitive study. Draper 1977–90 also contains numerous passages on Lassalle.
the fascist ‘community of labour’. After 1914, the Social Democrats were enlisted in the German war effort, and in 1918–20 played a decisive role in both managing and transforming the capitalist state, working with the army (through the Groener-Scheidemann pact of 1917) and later right-wing paramilitary groups to decapitate the fledgling German Communist Party of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in 1919.

But what is decisive here is not ‘betrayal’ or ‘collusion’ on the part of the SPD; it is the long continuity, dating back to the Lassallean phase, of a welfare-statist and corporatist ideology of a ‘people’s state’ that, with the SPD in power or out of power, was the key structural innovation, within the larger context of innovations briefly described, which accompanied the shift from extensive to intensive accumulation in both Germany and through the advanced capitalist world, haltingly in the 1920s and for an extended epoch (1945–73) after World War II.

What happened in Germany, once again, is precisely what did not occur in the US during the same transition. In the US, absolutism had not been necessary to bring modern industry into existence; on the contrary, the US ‘borrowed’ German institutional arrangements both in the 1890–1914 period and at the outset of the New Deal.46

IV. The breakthrough to industrial unionism in the US in the tow of a self-reforming capitalist state

The working-class cities and towns of the US were not merely an ‘archaeology’ of successive layers of immigration, ultimately linked to the rhythms of the

46 On this subject, one might well signal the brilliant if idiosyncratic work of John T. Flynn 1973 [1944]. Flynn began as a liberal of the New-Republic variety who subsequently moved across the political spectrum to right-wing isolationism by 1940. Here is the concise rendition of Flynn’s analysis:

... If you would know, therefore, who are the fascists in America, you must ask yourselves not who are the men and women most vocal in their denunciations of Hitler and Mussolini. ... The test of fascism is not one’s rage against the Italian and German war lords. The test is – how many of the essential principles of fascism do you accept and to what extent are you prepared to apply those fascist ideas to American social and economic life? When you can put your finger on the men or groups that urge for America the debt-supported state, the autarchical corporate state, the state bent on the socialization of investment and the bureaucratic government of industry and society, the establishment of the institution of militarism as the great glamorous public-works project and the institution of imperialism under which it proposes to regulate and rule the world ... – then you will know you have located the authentic fascist. (Flynn 1973, p. 252.)
European social history that expelled these groups from the land. Embedded within the structure of the AFL-CIO are the two phases of extensive and intensive development of capitalism discussed earlier.

Following the rise of the German SPD during and after the 1878–90 Anti-Socialist Laws in the country most advanced in the development of the modern welfare state, one European country after another developed socialist political parties in their modern form in the 1890–1905 period. By 1898–1900, the Socialist International founded in 1889 was already experiencing the internal crisis from the German revisionist debate and the French Millerand crisis, both centring on the question of the use of the existing capitalist state for a transition to socialism. During the same years, following the watershed US election of 1896, the majority of the US working class had been won over to support for the Republican Party. In each country, different relations between political party and trade union emerged; in the British Labour Party, founded in 1906, the trade unions predominated; in the French SFIO (founded 1905), the trade-union federation CGT, in the famous Amiens Charter of 1906, decided on full autonomy from politics and oriented itself toward direct action and general-strike theories of revolutionary syndicalism; in Germany, the SPD, at least nominally, dominated the trade unions. In the United States, the AFL, under the pressure of the strikes of 1892–4, came close for the one time in its history to an attempt at an independent labour party, but backed off in 1895. The American Socialist Party, at its high tide in the 1900–12 period, never succeeded in establishing any coherent relationship to any trade-union movement, and the joint attempt of the IWW and the Socialist Labor Party to launch such an organisation in 1905 did not last a year.

Much ‘institutional history’ has been written about the American trade-union movement and the successive (SP, SLP, CP) attempts at a working-class political party. And it is commonly recognised that behind the AFL and the CIO, respectively, are two phases of craft and then industrial unionism which corresponded to extensive and intensive capital accumulation (although these phases are not usually described in these terms). What has generally been missing in the historiography of the political and trade-union expressions of the American working class has been a synthetic perspective that can pull together the different strands developed here. For the basic thesis defended here, once again, is that what sets off American working-class history relative

to all other major capitalist countries was the development of the institutional arrangements for intensive accumulation without any direct working-class political participation in the state. Much working-class history, inspired by E.P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* (1963), has discussed religious, ethnic and craft factors in different local American labour experiences. This body of work arose in reaction (as indicated at the outset) to previous institutional (trade-union and political-party) biases of earlier treatments of US working-class experience. Much 1970s work focused on Taylorism and the battle for the control of the workplace in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But, generally lacking a comparative perspective with Europe, this work has generally not recognised the ‘substitute bourgeois revolution’ analysed above in European working-class parties and consequently have not identified the absence of such a party in the US with the absence of any need for such a substitute bourgeois revolution.

Let us look a little more closely at these phenomena. At the time of the formation of the German SPD in 1863, the industrial workers in the Northern US were mobilised under the auspices of Democratic Party machines and the ideology of radical Republicanism. At the time of the formation of the other parties of the Second International after 1890, the American working class was being mobilised behind the Republican Party in the ‘critical alignment’ election of 1896, shortly after the bloody railroad and steel strikes of the early 1890s. Finally, in the 1930s, when the democratic welfare state, fascism and Stalinism were completing the restructuring of conditions of accumulation in the five countries that revamped in the crucial 1860s decade, the US working class and its 1934–7 mobilisation were contained with relative ease within the New-Deal coalition and the Democratic Party where, by and large, it has remained ever since.

A first approximation of the explanation for this lies in the relationship of the trade-union movement to the state. In the same way that working-class political parties never established themselves in the US, industrial unionism came relatively late. The successful organisation of unions from the 1840s to the turn of the century occurred in craft production, whereas in the mass industries, in spite of the explosions of 1877, 1892–4, 1912 or 1919, trade

48 Montgomery 1967. Even thirty years later, ca. 1900, Mark Hanna was making a serious appeal for labour support to the Republican Party and supporting industrial unionism at a time when few capitalists and politicians did. Cf. Croly 1965 [1912], pp. 407–9.
unionism was successfully beaten back by employers, in the last instance (as in the Carnegie Steel strike of 1892) with private armies and Pinkerton guards. (It was noted earlier how this use of local militias and private paramilitary organisations tended to deflect working-class energies away from head-on collisions with the Federal government.) By contrast, in England and Germany, and to a lesser extent in France, mass industries were unionised or being unionised by 1900. Unionisation had proceeded in those countries to a degree that the sudden formation of ‘social patriot’ governments with the collapsed parties of the Second International in 1914 brought trade-union officials of all major belligerent countries onto war boards within the state for the first time in history. While the AFL of Samuel Gompers was also enlisted in such participation after 1917, it was very much a minority phenomenon standing in striking contrast to the repression that rained down on the IWW and left-wing Socialists in that year. Whereas the close of World War I saw the Russian Revolution, near-insurrectionary situations in Germany and Britain, and a large extension of unionisation in French industry through the strike waves of 1919–20, the explosion of strikes in the US in 1919 was followed by a new wave of repression in 1920. The wave of post-World War I factory committees and other corporatist forms had no counterpart in US working class until the passage of New-Deal labour legislation modelled on such problematic influences as Mussolini’s Carta del Lavoro. After 1920, the industrial working class in the US returned to its earlier state of disarray and dispersion until the mass strikes of 1934–7. The difference is revealed in the rationalisation movements of the 1920s in the respective industries of Germany and the US. In Germany, the SPD supported rationalisation, whereas in the US, following the Red Scare and Palmer Raids of 1920 and the shakeout of the 1920–1 depression, there was no need to enlist union support for rationalisation in the mass industries where it was pushed through, because they were not unionised.

49 Cf. Chapters 2–9 of Radosh 1969.
50 Repression also came down hard in Europe, but structural reform had to be used to contain the working class. Cf. Maier 1975.
51 Diggins 1972, provides excellent material on the progressive admirers of Mussolini such as Lincoln Steffens, Charles Beard, and Herbert Croly; even better, Gen. Hugh Johnson, who headed the National Recovery Administration, always carried a copy of corporative theorist Raffaelo Vigone’s Lo stato corporativo with him. On Johnson’s sympathy for the Italian corporative state, cf. Perkins 1946, p. 206.
52 Bernstein 1972, Chapter 2 describes the disarray of the American labour movement on the eve of the depression.
Once again: in Europe, working-class institutions were central in propelling capitalism into the corporatist and welfare-statist accommodation of the new intensive phase of accumulation represented by the new mass industries, whereas, in the US, while unions did indeed play such a role after 1934, no such working-class presence was necessary in the political sphere of the state. In the last instance, the real structural dynamic underlying the evolution of US working-class organisations in the period 1890–1945 is to be sought in the transformation of the world economy and the US position in that transformation. It suffices to touch on the highlights. From 1870 to 1914, the new mass industries which arose in Germany and the US were undermining English international hegemony, surpassing England industrially in around 1900. Nevertheless, based on its earlier hegemony, England retained a world financial role, with the pound as the de facto reserve currency, increasingly out of proportion to the role of the productive assets sustaining it. (The US since 1968–73 is in a roughly comparable situation.) The ‘thirty years’ crisis’ 1914–45 was a crisis of transition in which the US superseded the position of Britain in the world financial arena, creating a new equilibrium permitting a new phase of accumulation for nearly three decades. In this transition, it is important to highlight the little-discussed reality that the length and depth of the post-1945 boom was due not merely to the re-establishment of an international ‘lender of last resort’ following the demise of Britain, but equally to the vast internationalisation of the world economy expressed in the institutional arrangements (Bretton Woods, IMF, World Bank, GATT, etc.) that emerged in 1944–8. It was precisely this internationalisation which created the economies of scale for the pent-up forces of the US and German mass industries which were confined within national tariffs and capital structures up to World War II. The creation of the ‘welfare state’ after 1945 was inseparable from the creation of these international arrangements, as evidenced by the crisis of the welfare state simultaneous with the crisis of these arrangements after 1973.

The success of the New-Deal transformation of the American state cannot be separated from the international institutions which were its extension after 1945, any more than the expansionary phase of the US economy from 1945 to 1973 can be separated from the international role of the dollar established in 1945. Had the internationalisation of the world economy achieved by World War II not occurred, there is no reason to believe that the capitalist world would have peacefully extricated itself from the morass of national autarchy
régimes of the 1930s; too many specific groups in too many countries, beginning with the City of London, had to be forcibly integrated into new international structures before a level of trade permitting a return of boom conditions could be resumed. The story of the 1945–73 boom is, moreover, essentially the story of the expansion to the entirety of the advanced capitalist world of the forms of production and consumption elaborated by American and German mass industries in the 1920s. Seen in this light, the breakthrough to industrial unionism in the US, some decades after it had occurred in most Western-European countries, can be seen as an indispensable force propelling the domestic reorganisation of the US state and economy for a new phase of accumulation and a new international role. The industrial unions so ruthlessly combatted from the 1870s to the 1920s were finally accepted in the 1930s, certainly not without resistance by important groups of capitalists, but with tacit encouragement of New-Deal labour legislation and, during the militant upsurges of 1934–7, at worst a mild resignation by the Roosevelt administration, not to mention a political instrumentalisation of the mass movement to defeat die-hard capitalist opponents of the New Deal. In Western Europe, the industrial unions which had won varying degrees of acceptance before World War I played crucial roles in the wartime governments, enforcing the social ‘Bürhfrieden’ in every country, with working-class parties participating explicitly in the state either during or after the War. In the US, on the contrary, the final breakthrough to industrial unionism occurred within the context of the general reshaping of the US state for a new international role. Four years after the basic recognition of the CIO unions, those same unions were enforcing the ‘no strike pledge’ against rebellious rank-and-file workers, serving on wartime wage-and-price committees, and giving up extensive gains from the organising drives of the 1930s. In Western Europe, corporatist forms of labour integration had to be developed in response to industrial unions (not to mentioned revolutionary mass strikes); in the US, the creation of industrial unionism followed the corporatist collective bargaining legislation of the New Deal. In contrast to Europe, where working-class parties had to move in and out of power in the interwar period and after 1945, in the US these corporatist forms were elaborated with the working class politically in tow, and consequently no independent party was needed to push them through.

53 McConnell 1966, Chapter 9 develops one of the few analyses that sees US labour institutions as essentially corporatised by the New Deal, above all by the experience of World War II.
V. The marginality of American socialist movements, 1900–45

Having established a general framework for analysing the absence of socialism as a serious force in American politics, we are now in a position to examine some concrete experiences, primarily of the Socialist and then Communist Parties.

The American Socialist Party, that ‘socialism of dentists’ as Trotsky called it (perhaps a bit unfairly) during his sojourn in New York in 1917, was characterised from beginning to end by the predominance of a reformist centre and a right wing. The potential Rosa Luxemburgs and Karl Liebknechts of American socialism, during the period of its 1900–12 heyday, found themselves scattered on the left wing of the party, in De Leon’s Socialist Labor Party, in the IWW and in immigrant ghetto currents such as the Jewish anarchists of New York’s Lower East Side. The most powerful experience of the Party, aside from Debs’s 1912 and 1920 presidential campaigns, were the SP’s municipal socialist electoral victories in the first decade of the century and in its influence among agrarian radicals of the Midwest and Southwest after the demise of populism. In contrast to the parties of continental Europe, the American SP never established a trade-union federation or anything close to it. In the last instance, it was Milwaukee mayor Victor Berger, more than Debs or figures such as John Reed, who best expressed the dominant tone of the SP. In certain ways, the SP was rather inferior to earlier American working-class organisations such as the Knights of Labor in the 1870s which, while not a political party as such, did organise workers on a regional basis regardless of craft, ethnic group or race; the SP always had difficulties with racist and chauvinist elements in its own ranks, such as when the California section of the party supported anti-Asian immigration legislation in 1908.

The American SP (like the American CP after it) produced no body of theory of note. Its most impressive left-wing figure, Debs, was a great indigenous working-class leader but not someone capable of the level of political leadership thrown up on the left wing of the of the major Second-International parties in Europe. One figure who might have been capable of such a level (and who on occasion impressed the likes of Lenin), Daniel De Leon, was sequestered (or, in other versions, sequestered himself) in the Socialist Labor Party. While the SLP in the US never succeeded in elevating itself above the status of a sect, De Leon’s writing had considerable impact abroad, where it intersected the militant syndicalist movement of Britain, Scotland, Ireland and France in the 1900–10 period. Thus De Leon might
indeed have prospered in a more propitious social environment. In 1905–6, the brief attempt of the SLP and the IWW to establish a party-trade-union federation relationship akin to continental models ended in failure and mutual recrimination, faltering (at the very least) on the incompatibility of De Leon’s unbending orthodoxy and the deep-running anti-political bias of the syndicalists of the IWW. But De Leon did on occasion distinguish himself internationally at congresses of the Second International, where he was among the minority of supporters of Rosa Luxemburg in her battles against Bernsteinianism and the Kautskyist Centre. Toward the end of his life, Lenin remembered De Leon as one of the more original figures of the pre-1914 period. But history denied De Leon a context in which a real estimation of his abilities could be made.

A fundamental problem of the American SP was its own vagueness, on the one hand, and the fact that it had many competitors. Its lack of theoretical and political clarity muddled the lines between it and populism and progressivism on its right and the IWW and the SLP on its left. This was, after all, an era in which the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism was deeply entrenched. As in the Europe of 1848, when words such as ‘liberalism’, ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ were used almost interchangeably, the American SP existed in an environment in which muckraking agitation against monopolies and trusts, or on behalf of clean municipal government and public ownership of utilities could appear as ‘socialist’. The fundamental problem of pre-1914 socialism (and not merely in the US) was that capitalism realised, or appeared to realise, so much of its programme. Before the débâcle of the Soviet experience, and the failure of the various left-wing political parties in power in the interwar period or after World War II, that is to say before any political party calling itself Marxist had ever controlled a state, it was more difficult than it is today to see what was essentially capitalist about capitalism. Before the progressives and then the New-Deal state greatly rationalised capitalist exploitation, none of this was so readily apparent.

In line with the argument developed in earlier sections, it can be noted that the diffuseness of American socialism and its difficulty in clearly distinguishing itself from various other reform movements was another expression of the fact that, in contrast to its fraternal parties in Europe, its services were never needed for a reform of the state apparatus. Precisely because the SP and then the CP (in the New-Deal period) were difficult to distinguish from the honest capitalist reformers, these parties never had to run hard up against the resistance of the entrenched political and social...
structures that confronted socialists in the doddering monarchies of Central and Eastern Europe. Precisely because there were in the US, as to a lesser extent in countries like pre-war Britain or Sweden, ‘progressive’ capitalist forces that did not have to expend all their energies in battles with entrenched conservatives, and who had not, as in France, Germany and Italy, been frightened by working-class explosions into exclusive alliances with such conservatives, American socialism was never compelled to define itself sharply relative to its immediate environment. Had it done so, it would in all likelihood have been relegated to the same marginality as De Leon’s SLP.

Realities that remained only partially visible with the American SP in the 1900–12 period became fully elaborated with the CPUSA of the New-Deal era. Here, in contrast to the experience of the SP, an American socialist party came to decisively influence the political climate of the country for more than a decade. Unlike its European counterparts in Spain or France in the Popular-Front era or in France, Italy and Belgium in 1944–7, the CPUSA never even came close to being a party of the state. But the American CP, through its role in the creation of the CIO, the impact it had on fellow-traveller artists and intellectuals and, during World War II, its fervent support of the US war effort and influence in the New-Deal bureaucracy (again, probably more through fellow travellers than actual members) the CP exercised a kind of influence in American politics never enjoyed by any socialist movement before or since. At its high tide in 1935–9, the CPUSA probably had 100,000 members, and, once again through the fellow-traveller milieu, an influence quite disproportionate to its numbers.

Much has been written about the CP’s role in the New Deal and during World War II that cannot be the focus here. The history of its emergence from the left wing of the SP, the IWW and the SLP, its dispersion during the Red Scare of 1920, or its role in the 1928–34 ‘Third Period’ when it applied the Comintern’s ‘social-fascist’ analysis to the remnants of the SP and to the AFL bureaucrats, are well beyond the scope of this essay. What is at issue, following from the earlier analysis, is the source and impact of the CP’s influence after it dropped its Third-Period rhetoric and embraced the New Deal in 1935.

Most of the writing on the histories of the SP and CP are, as indicated earlier, of the institutional and political variety. Most of the labour histories of the formation of the CIO\(^5\) are institutional histories focusing on trade

\(^5\) On the formation of the CIO, basic accounts are in Preis 1964 and Bernstein 1972.
unions or offering chronological accounts of strikes. But the casual reader of the history of socialism in America from 1890 to 1945 cannot fail to be struck by the discontinuity between the significant ideological spectrum of the 1890–1930 period as contrasted with what became the dominant left discourse in the course of the 1930s. In the earlier period, Debsian socialism, the orthodoxy of De Leon and its occasional brilliant flashes, the syndicalism of the IWW, Greenwich Village radicalism as expressed by the early (1908–17) phase of *The Masses*, or Jewish anarchism, all vied with the more business-like municipal ‘socialism of dentists’ of the Victor Bergers. When one considers, by contrast, the ideological debates of the 1930s, it is as if the rationalisation of the capitalist state by Progressivism and the early New-Deal had ‘stratified’ and greatly reduced the scope of the competing ideologies on the Left. Viewed on the level of the visible leadership (simply because this is the level most accessible to us) this discontinuity is less clear-cut but it is there. The early years of the groups that fused to become the CPUSA, when it was still a relatively anarchic fusion of the best of the old SP, the Wobblies and the SLP, attracted and produced some first-rate Marxist intellectuals and working-class leaders who are obscure, as with the case of De Leon before World War I, because of what their historical context offered them. Figures such as John Reed, James Cannon, Max Shachtman, Max Eastman or Louis Fraina were leaders and fighters who, while they did not produce a body of theoretical work comparable to their European counterparts Bordiga, Lukács, Gorter, Pannekoek or Korsch, did at least stand against the international consolidation of social-democratic reformism and Stalinist counterrevolution with tenacity and sometimes brilliance, in the Minneapolis ‘proto-soviet’ of 1934 and elsewhere in the 1934–7 strike wave acted like revolutionaries in an atmosphere in which slogans such as ‘Communism is twentieth-century Americanism’ were tying the vast majority of the trade-union movement and organised Left to the New-Deal state for a generation or more.

In contrast to institutional, political and ideological accounts of these developments, this study attempts to offer a structural analysis of a worldwide transformation of capitalism from an ‘extensive’ to an ‘intensive’ phase of accumulation that was occurring in the US and German supersession of the earlier ‘Anglo-French’ era of liberal capitalism from the 1870s onward. For it is exactly such a framework that enables us to concretely tie the respective histories of the American SP and CP to the overall analysis presented earlier. The impoverishment of socialist theory, the relegation to folkloric status of
the kinds of popularly-based ‘intransigent’ currents of working-class radicalism of the 1890–1920 period, of Debs, the best agrarian radicals, the IWW, De Leon, the cultural radicalism of *The Masses*, or the Jewish anarchists of New York’s garment trades is to be understood within the context of the statification of social life which first surfaced in progressivism and which culminated in the New Deal after 1933. The participation of the European socialists and Communists in the state in the 1930s and 1940s, in contrast to the US, thus appears as a weakness, not a strength, because in the US alone such participation was unnecessary to push through that statification.

Finally, and most importantly (in the contemporary atmosphere of obsessions with the state and its so-called autonomy) this analysis does not attribute the structural transformation of the state and society to the agency of the state, but rather to the underlying phase change in capitalism from extensive to intensive accumulation with the 1933–45 and above all post-World War II welfare states were created to accommodate.

The power of this perspective is that it frees us from the theories which explain this impoverishment of socialism (as Engels warns in the opening quote) by leaders, or the ‘bureaucratisation’ of political parties, or ‘betrayals’. In this optic, one cannot ‘see’ the qualitative shift between the working-class movement, and hence its institutions, leaders and ideas, in 1890–1920 compared to 1933–45 unless one avoids such voluntarist, moralistic or idealist explanations (‘they had the wrong ideas’) and focus on the underlying structural transformation of capitalist accumulation. Some of these analyses, written

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James 1980 [1948] puts this a different way, arguing against the Trotskyist idea that Stalinists ‘betray’ the working class, emphasising instead the world-historical moment of accumulation that brought them to the fore and of which they were one important, perhaps the most important, expression:

Whatever their social origin, whatever their subjective motives, the fact remains that stalinism finds this caste of labor leaders all over the world, in China, in Korea, in Spain, in Brazil, everywhere, intellectuals, labor leaders, workers who rise – the caste grows, changes composition, but it remains as an entity. It faces death, undergoes torture, finds energy, ingenuity, devotion, establishes a tradition, maintains it, develops it, commits the greatest crimes with a boldness and confidence that can only come from men who are certain of their historic mission.

As I think over Trotsky’s writings I can see this sequence of cause and effect in an endless chain. This happened, then the other, then the stalinist bureaucracy did this; then; and so he keeps up an endless series of explanations, fascinating, brilliant, full of insight and illumination, to crash into his catastrophic blunders at the end. . . . We, on the other hand, who show that stalinist cause could create the mighty worldwide effect because it elicited class forces hostile to the proletariat and inherent in capitalist
close to the events, have even been put forward by currents most aware of the degeneration underway, and if even confusedly, directly attempting to combat it. The world depression of the 1930s, the rise of fascism and Stalinism, the pressures of the anti-fascist popular fronts, World War II, the resistance movements and the battles of the postwar period (‘governments of national reconstruction’, in Europe, McCarthyism in the US) did not create much space for socialists of any stripe to analyse in a leisurely fashion the phase-change underway in world accumulation, still less to foresee the 1945–73 boom under US auspices. The depression of the 1930s looked very much like the death agony of capitalism predicted by Marx, and the social pathologies to which it gave rise looked very much like the barbarism which Marx saw as the real long-term historical rival of socialism. In such a climate, it is easy to see why the best-intentioned people could attribute the enlistment of the Communist Party in its role as ginger man and errand boy for the Rooseveltian New-Deal as a betrayal, as a question of leadership and tactics. What hindsight affords us is a view, such as that presented earlier, of a wide variety of different states and polities by which capitalism carried out the structural transformation of the 1890–1945 period. This is not to say that the New-Deal, fascism, popular frontism or Stalinism were really identical political formations, as figures such as James Burnham or Bruno Rizzi tried to argue in 1940. But they were specific national sector responses to one single world-economic structural transformation underway, culminations of trends existing, as argued previously, from the 1860s onward. A certain time perspective makes visible, behind the battles of ideologies and political forms, certain other forces at work ‘behind the backs’ of the actors. And the purpose of such retrospective analysis, obviously, is not to complacently proclaim an end to ideologies, but on the contrary to

society at this stage in its development, we restore to the proletarian struggle the historical struggle of the classes with social roots. We finish away with the demoralizing, in fact self-destroying, theory that everything would have been all right, but for the intervention of stalinist corruption’. James 1980.

56 Trotsky, in the 1938 Transitional Programme of the newly-formed Fourth International, wrote: ‘The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.’ Trotsky 1973, p. 73.

57 Marx and Engels, in the second paragraph of The Communist Manifesto, refer to ‘the common ruin of contending classes’ as the alternative to a successful ‘revolutionary reconstitution of society at large’.

illuminate contemporary situations in which further historical extensions of such confrontations are being prepared, in suitably transposed and modern form.

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We propose to argue a simple basic thesis about US capitalism relating to a certain uniqueness of its contradictions.¹ On the one hand, capitalism has delivered a stunning standard of living to US workers across the last 150 years, perhaps the best such showing by any capitalist country. The result is that workers in the US today enjoy exceptional levels of personal consumption and wealth as well as formal political freedoms. These aspects represent the success of US capitalism. On the other hand, this capitalism has subjected productive labourers to probably the highest rate of class exploitation (ratio of surplus to necessary labour) in the capitalist world. Such exploitation contributes to the exceptional levels of exhaustion, stress, drug-dependency, loneliness, mass disaffection from civic life, dysfunctional families and endemic violence pervading US workers’ lives.

¹ This paper represents a report on research in progress. The larger project entails a systematic class analysis of the US social formation. Among the goals of that project we include the understanding of the unique qualities of US capitalism and the relative weaknesses of its socialist and communist anticapitalist movements. We wish to thank especially Max Fraad-Wolff who provided invaluable assistance in selecting, organising and presenting several series of economic statistics. We wish also to thank the following for making their statistical data available for the charts in this paper: Douglas Henwood, Gerard Duménil, and Dominique Lévy.
Extraordinary exploitation yields a robust US capitalism yet also one dependent on, and ultimately vulnerable to, a working class in deep distress. It yields a huge and growing gap between the rich and powerful few and the mass. The sweep of US history since the Civil War generated a capitalism that was both very strong and very weak.

The relative weakness of the US trade-union movement and the Left generally reveal that intense class exploitation did not generate successful organisations to limit, let alone to challenge, capitalism. Instead, we would argue that workers’ rising consumption compensated for – and thereby helped to suppress workers’ consciousness of – their rising class exploitation. Indeed, the hegemonic ideology and culture enthusiastically endorsed, naturalised, and celebrated this arrangement as the best of all possible worlds. Thus, one of the founding premises of neoclassical economics, the economic ideology so dominant in the US, holds that labour is inherently negative (a ‘disutility’) while consumption is inherently positive (a ‘utility’). Life is then presumed to be driven by the goal of maximising the difference between them. The alternative goal of changing the class organisation and hence the lived experience of production disappears as absurd, technologically impractical, and a ridiculous utopian fantasy. Indeed, the very concept of a class structure of production – how surplus labour is organised there – is banished from conscious public discourse. Consequently, capitalist exploitation is the absolute, unchallenged given – to be accommodated as the inevitable reality and to be compensated by consumption. Living well is the only solace as well as the only revenge.

US capitalism thus appears as the historical validation of Adam Smith’s response to the dangerous legacy of the works of Hobbes and Locke. Locke had been horrified by Hobbes’s Leviathan. Hobbes feared that the demise of feudalism’s hierarchical orders (manor, church, and state) risked the cataclysmic war of all against all and thus necessitated the powerful state to safeguard civilisation. Locke, in contrast, feared that such a powerful state would reverse social progress (his view of the transition from serfs to land-owning, independent farmers). For Locke, the strong state represented a retreat back toward a hated feudalism. Yet Locke worried about Hobbes’s dark vision and sought instead some basic rule for the new world of independent farmers. How, in the absence of a strong state, might the independent producers be constrained to solve their individual economic problems other than by a socially destructive war/competition of all against all? He found the guarantee
that he sought in an absolute régime of economic equality: every individual farmer should only ever own as much land as he himself could farm. This equality of private property in the means of production would secure social peace, tranquillity and prosperity while obviating the need for a strong state.

However, as Smith later noted with alarm, Locke’s vision had been rendered obsolete by history. Inequality among individual farmers displaced equality. Many independent farmers, undone by climate, illness, poor soil, and technical change, were eventually forced to sell their land and animals to survive and then to sell what finally remained: their labour-power. The relatively few independent farmers who thrived could and did buy the land, animals, and then the labour-power of the many who did not. Independent production by roughly equal farmers gave way to the expanding inequality – economic, but also political and cultural – of capitalist farming. And the parallel evolution proceeded from independent craftspeople to the juxtaposition of capitalist manufacturers and industrial wage-earners. With Locke’s solution to Hobbes’s dilemma rendered moot by history, Adam Smith confronted Hobbes’s challenge again. What now would preclude the demise of civilisation as the deepening economic inequality between sellers and buyers of labour-power cultivated the envy, despair, and resentment that once again risked a war of all against all?

Smith’s answer was the free market, whose unfettered expansion would enable rising productivity and thus a rising absolute level of consumption for the sellers of labour-power. Free markets negotiated by owners of private property (in land, labour-power, and the commodity products of capitalist industry) would, he argued, yield the fastest possible growth of production. That would enable social peace. Capitalism could prosper indefinitely if the masses without property (in terms of the means of production) who were suffering exploitation in production were compensated by rising individual consumption.² Capitalist class relations in production and their political and cultural effects would be tolerated by the masses in so far as they demanded and generally received in return a rising standard of living. A capitalism that

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² Smith recognised that profits were a portion of the workers’ product that was ‘deducted’ from them (and thus akin to Marx’s surplus as the yield of an exploitation). However, he also expressed the relation of wages, profits and rents differently in his writings. This has occasioned much debate about Smith’s economics ever since. The appreciative critique of Smith by Marx is best seen in the latter’s Theories of Surplus-Value.
delivered the latter would thereby secure itself. This Smithian hope matches the US experience to a stunning degree.

**A class-analytical framework**

What does a Marxian class-analytical framework focused on the organisation of the surplus tell us about US capitalism? First, we recognise and underscore the extraordinary quantitative dimensions of the surplus produced by productive workers in the US and appropriated by their capitalist employers. An historically shrinking portion of the value added by those workers during production has been returned to them as wages, while the expanding portion—the surplus-value—accrued to their employers. Typically organised as the boards of directors of industrial capitalist corporations, the employers paid out portions of the appropriated surplus-value to persons, enterprises, and institutions to secure various conditions that enable capitalist exploitation to continue and expand. Thus, for example, portions went to managers (to purchase inputs, sell outputs, discipline workers, accumulate capital, and invent new use values to produce), to creditors (as interest on loans), to shareholders (dividends), to merchants (for wholesale and retail marketing of outputs), to the state (taxes), and to landlords (rents). The expansion of the surplus they appropriated in turn enabled industrial capitalists to increase the surplus allocated to capital accumulation: that is, to an ever larger and more efficient army of productive workers equipped with new farm and industrial machinery. US industrial capitalists distributed another part of their appropriated surplus-value to a growing corporate management bureaucracy that organised, monitored, disciplined, technically revolutionised, and endlessly adjusted the expanding industrial capitalist enterprises.

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3 Marxian (and other) ‘class’ analyses have defined class in very different ways. The two oldest definitions, which predate Marx by centuries, focus on property and power respectively. Class refers either to the distribution of wealth (rich versus poor, propertied vs. propertyless) or of power (rulers vs. ruled, powerful vs. powerless). Gradations (as in various ‘middle’ classes) abound in both property and power conceptualisations of class. In our view, Marx added another and different concept of class, one focused on the surplus achieved in production. For him, classes were then defined in terms of who produced vs. who appropriated this surplus and also who distributed and received distributions of the surplus after its was produced and appropriated. This surplus definition of class is what we use in this paper. It is discussed at length and differentiated from other concepts of class in Resnick and Wolff 1987, Chapter 3.

4 Resnick and Wolff 1987, Chapter 4.
Yet another portion of capitalists’ surplus-value flowed to a complex network of wholesale and retail traders whose sales activities – marketing industrial capitalists’ commodity outputs – spanned a vast continent and beyond. Still other portions of surplus-value were allocated as (i) rents to owners of the lands increasingly made available to capitalist farming, mining, and manufacturing enterprises, (ii) interest and fees to banks and financiers extending credits to borrowing industrial capitalists, and (iii) taxes to help fund a state without whose myriad services private capitalism in the US could never have grown as it did.

As Marx noted, the activities of corporate managers, merchants, landlords, bankers, and the state require them all to hire workers. Indeed, they paid such workers by using part of the surplus-value that capitalists had distributed to them. These workers provide the conditions (management, credit, merchandising, policing, dispute adjudication, and so forth) for capitalist exploitation to occur in industrial production; they literally enabled capitalist exploitation. However, enabling work is different from (albeit necessary for) the work of surplus production. Marx thus distinguished unproductive from productive labour/ers. Like productive workers, the unproductive also sell their labour-power to employers and struggle over its price. They both are wage-earners, but they differ in their relation to the production and distribution of surplus-value.

Using this framework, it follows that a rising surplus – a rising mass and rate of surplus-value – may make possible both a rising standard of consumption for productive labourers and also a rising level of consumption for ever more unproductive labourers. We think that US history displays both in its unique fulfilment of Adam Smith’s hopes for a secure capitalism. Indeed, consumption in the US evolved into a complex and hierarchically structured system prompting workers to shift between productive and unproductive jobs (popularly reconceived as lower/higher, blue-collar/white-collar, unskilled/skilled, and other dichotomies) in response to the qualities and quantities of consumption associated with each kind of work. The US’s social obsession with the quantities and qualities of consumption came to be inculcated culturally from birth. In striking contrast, the conditions of production received relatively little attention (except from a few specialists). Production conditions were thought instead to be dictated by technology and the presumably universal desire for ever more consumption. The surplus aspects of production remained nearly totally invisible.
The basic story

Once native populations had been ethnically cleansed from the West and the competing slave economic system militarily repressed in the South, capitalist enterprises could expand dramatically. Waves of cheap immigrant labour blunted what might otherwise have been an explosive confrontation between capitalists and the self-employed farmers and other small craft producers (Marx’s ‘ancient’ class structure) over the supply of labour-power. The ancients could and did nurture a culture of individual initiative, self-reliance, and largely rural values. The capitalists built up an industrial and largely urban counterculture. The latter progressively subordinated or decimated the former, yet large pockets of self-employed producers remained and new groups of them constantly developed. In this sense, the US enterprise economy has always been and continues to be a shifting mixture of capitalist and non-capitalist class structures.

The successive waves of immigrants typically arrived from economically depressed origins. They usually accepted industrial wages below the US norms, thereby exerting downward pressures on US wages. Stagnant or falling values of labour-power sold to capitalists enabled them to capture rising productivity in the form of a rapidly rising surplus. The capitalists’ distributions of portions of that surplus to accumulation (raising capital labour ratios and embodying new technologies), to salaries and budgets for improved management, to taxes for expanding state expenditures on health and educational facilities, and so forth had much to do with that rising productivity. Each wave of immigrant workers was pressed to define its gradual ‘Americanisation’ in terms of specific qualities and rising quantities of consumption, following the paths of previous waves. In this way, a pattern settled into the US psyche: while accepting intensely exploitative working conditions – high rates of exploitation – workers focused their attention on consumption patterns that would signify their ‘arrival’ in the fullest senses of citizenship and social prestige.

However beneficial the effects on surplus production of the immigrants’ economic, political, and cultural integration into the expanding US capitalism, the chief mechanism of capitalism’s success in the US lay elsewhere. Marx’s discussion of ‘relative surplus-value’ in *Capital*, Volume 1 pointed the way in abstract terms. There, he argued that capitalist competition had both positive and negative effects on capitalists. Those who, via their distributions out of
appropriated surpluses, most raised productivity (that is, most lowered the cost per unit of their commodity outputs) gained ‘super-profits’ at the expense of those who fell behind in the productivity race. If the latter could not keep up, they were driven out of business. In this way, competition eventually turned into its opposites, oligopoly and monopoly. Such negative effects for less efficient capitalists occurred side-by-side with positive effects for all surviving capitalists. Marx showed how capitalist competition, by lowering capitalist commodities’ per unit costs, thereby reduced the costs of the workers’ bundle of wage goods. Since the latter thus took less of society’s total labour to produce, more of that labour was available to produce surpluses appropriated by capitalists. In Marx’s terms, the value of labour-power had fallen relative to the value added by the labourer, thereby generating relative surplus-value. Indeed, perhaps the key genius of US capitalist development was this: the drop in the values per unit of wage goods was generally greater than the drop in the value of labour-power. Thus, workers realised a rising standard of living (real wage) even as the surplus they produced and delivered to capitalists rose both absolutely and relative to workers’ wages. In Adam Smith’s terms, a widening disparity between the wealth accruing to a minority of capitalists and that accruing to the mass of workers was tolerated because it was accompanied, in the US, by a rising real wage.

The following two charts suggest a rise in the long run rate of class exploitation in the US. In Chart 1, real earnings of American workers rose on the average of 1.5 percent per year over most of the nineteenth and all of the twentieth century. Chart 2 indicates an average rise of nearly 2 per cent in labour productivity since 1870. Together, the charts suggest that unit values of capitalist commodities fell more than real wages rose. This means in terms of the central argument of our text that the rate of exploitation (surplus-value relative to the value of labour-power) rose dramatically across US history. Indeed, the comparison between the two series becomes even more striking when we examine the averages for both time series since 1870. Starting in 1870, workers’ real wages rose on the average of 1.29 per cent per year while their productivity rose 1.97 per cent per year. A difference of almost 0.7 per cent per year for 130 years provides some measure of the huge gap over much of US industrial history between the expansion of value produced by workers and the return to those workers.
The centrality of rising consumption levels has shaped US culture and politics as well as the economy since the Civil War. In so far as trade unions developed, it seemed natural and obvious that their dominant focus would be on raising real wages. In so far as anticapitalist social movements emerged, they seemed irrelevant to (and thus were undermined by) the ‘success’ of US capitalism in ‘meeting workers’ needs’ by raising wages. Workers’ goals were endlessly reiterated, not least by the workers themselves, as reducible to increasing privately consumable goods and services, not to a change in the class structure of production.

In such a context, the modern commodity advertising industry grew to a social dominance in the US still unequalled elsewhere. Advertising completed the social positioning of consumption as the highest goal and virtue, the measure of achievement and social standing. Not only does advertising pander to the large market for consumer goods created by the US’s path of capitalist development, it also functions as a powerful tool to keep the mass obsession with consumption at fever pitch. Advertising shapes the consciousness of the US masses such that they fulfil Adam Smith’s hope: seeing consumption as the only and the adequate compensation for the exploitation of their labour and all its consequences upon their lives.

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Chart 1: Real Earnings 1820–1999

real weekly earnings, annual growth rate by decade, 1820–2000

1820–2000 average: +1.5%

Data taken from: [http://www.panix.com/~dhenwood/Stats_ears](http://www.panix.com/~dhenwood/Stats_ears)

Sources: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970
Real wage is the nominal wage divided by the consumer price index.
Of course, advertising functions in other capitalist economies just as consumption functions elsewhere too as a compensation for capitalist exploitation. Their difference from the US, however, lies in the balance between consumption and alternative modes of reacting to and coping with capitalist exploitation. Nothing inevitable attaches to the particular US path of capitalist development. In much European capitalism, for example, left trade unions, political parties, and social movements are far stronger than in the US. They represent a different worker reaction, one focused less on individual consumption levels and more on collective (often political) efforts to improve workers’ lives in other ways. Hence, European social democracies have won longer vacations, greater worker job control, more favourable work rules, and more collective consumption (national health insurance, more subsidised public education, etc.) than workers enjoy in the US. European workers have traditionally seen many more of
their interests dependent on collective action through unions and left political parties, and therefore they display generally greater degrees of civic participation, support more ideologically diverse media, and so on. US workers have rather seen their interests as much more narrowly focused on securing higher rates of individual consumption.

The differences between US and other capitalisms are matters of degree: they differ in how well they have fulfilled Adam Smith’s hope. The US so far excels, although many other capitalisms seek to replicate the US experience. However, the wealth of the world remains disproportionately invested in the US because its owners’ collective judgement seems to be that the US remains the world’s securest capitalist economy.

On the other hand, US capitalism also shows another face, the other side of its coupling high exploitation with high levels of individual consumption. Fulfilling Adam Smith’s hope has entailed costs that neither he nor his ideological descendants have understood. Endless statistical series document these interrelated costs: legal and illegal drug abuse; work exhaustion; psychological depression; environmental degradation; spousal, child, and sexual abuse; divorce; interpersonal violence; gun fetishisation; rejection of civic participation (as in voting, parental involvement in schools, widespread disinterest in world affairs or any public political debate); road rage, and the lonely isolation of daily life. The result is a very fragile US working class. Various writers have analysed this fragility, although not, of course, as the ineluctable other side of a capitalist success that couples high exploitation and high individual consumption. US capitalists support the countless 12-step programmes that now enrol tens of millions of US workers in religiously

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5 Our argument is not that severe class exploitation is the only or even the most basic cause of these costs but rather that it contributed to them. Marxism has long recognised that alienating their labour-power and having their surplus labour appropriated by capitalists upsets and angers workers. Lacking class-consciousness however, they are unaware of their being exploited in this way. Nor do others intervene to help them. Hence this cause of their discomfort, irritation, and resentment remains unrecognised, left in their unconscious realm to add its influence on how they understand themselves and interact with other workers, their families and public life in general.

6 Thus Robert Lane can write about the ‘loss of happiness’ which he links to the market (Lane 2000). Sullivan, Warren and Westbrook nicely document the way in which the focus on individual consumption can come to contradict and even threaten capitalism when its excesses plunge workers into unsustainable indebtedness (Sullivan, Warren and Westbrook 2000). For examples of the considerable literature on worker’s complex fragilities notwithstanding rising individual consumption, see Blau 1999, Perrucci and Wysong 1999 and Chasin 1997.
inflected recovery regimes for alcoholism, drug dependency, gambling obsessions – and indeed the entire list of social costs of the world’s most exploitative capitalism. Large corporations regrettfully deflect portions of their surpluses from capital accumulation to in-house programmes, largely ineffective, to counter their workers’ absenteeism, disinterest in their jobs, psychological and emotional stresses, and many other problems undermining productivity. Corporate leaders press the schools, the media, churches, and the state to do likewise with equally unimpressive and frustrating results. Thus, an enormous risk lurks just below the surface of the US’s successful capitalism: might the severe human costs of intense exploitation eventually feed back cumulatively onto job performance and/or workers’ ideologies to endanger the capitalists’ surplus?

In class terms, one major cost of successful (that is, high rates of) US capitalist exploitation can be located inside its households. There, human beings also labour, using tools and equipment to transform raw materials into final goods and services. Some family members shop, cook, clean, and repair not only for themselves but also for other family members. These family members thus produce a surplus as they do household work. Consequently, households have class structures: household surpluses are produced, appropriated, and distributed.7

In simplest terms, the success of exploitation in capitalist enterprises in recent decades has cost the disintegration of US households’ class structures and thus deeply damaged the relationships of their inhabitants. In the traditional US household, wives produced the surplus and delivered it in use-value form to others, their husbands, who then distributed it among family members. Especially over the last fifty years, those wives have added enterprise employment to their household labours. One chief motivator of this massive social movement was, again, consumption. Either to raise individual consumption levels for all the reasons mentioned earlier and/or to compensate for the falling real wages of their husbands since the mid-1970s, US women moved into waged work. This strained household class structures as women’s wage-labour outside the household reacted back to reduce their surplus labour inside and to awaken challenges to household class structures more generally (although not, of course, in these class terms, which were unknown). In these difficult circumstances, many families reached

breaking point as revealed in statistics on divorce, abandonment, spousal abuse, neglect of children, and so on. As family relationships broke down, exploitation at the workplace was less well offset in and by consumption at home. Because the US Left lacked a class analysis (in surplus terms) of either the enterprise or the household, it could not intervene effectively in these developments to fashion a strategy or support a class-revolutionary movement in response to these painful developments. However, the Christian Right in US politics did. Under the banner of ‘family values’, it at least spoke to the felt misery of personal and family lives, even while it offered only reactionary and ineffective proposals aimed to reconstitute the traditional feudal family class structure that US capitalism was relentlessly destroying. Of course, the Christian Right could hardly identify capitalism as the culprit. It vented its force instead against abortion and homosexuality as the enemies of ‘the family’ and for politicians who proclaimed ‘family values’.

**US exceptionalism: why no socialism?**

One basis for the weakness of socialism in the US has been capitalism’s success in fulfilling Adam Smith’s hope. Rising consumption served to enable (by compensating for) rising exploitation. However, another basis has been the failure of socialists to grasp the vulnerability of this success and to target it explicitly within their anticapitalist strategies. Thus, for example, socialist strategies focused on raising real wages were often seriously mistaken. Even when they found audiences (understandably located in the lowest-income sectors), many within those audiences were soon lost to the much more intensively promoted individualist means for raising incomes (for example, more education, better training, different dress codes and diets, other lifestyle changes, home location changes, and so forth). For such persons, socialist activism aimed at the same objective seemed less effective as well as much more personally risky. Moreover, to the extent that socialism came to be associated closely with overcoming poverty – and especially with the poor for whom the socially sanctioned individualist solutions had not worked – the workers who did emerge from such poverty dismissed socialism as no longer, if ever, relevant to them. In short, socialism in the US weakened its own cause by too often and too narrowly defining its goals in terms of raising wages and workers’ consumption levels.

This identified socialism’s goals with just those rising levels of individual
consumption that US capitalism promised, actually delivered for many individual workers, and that it carefully attributed to their individual contributions to production. Both popular ideology and the neoclassical economic theory hegemonic in academia made sure to explain rising wages as caused exclusively by each individual’s qualitative and quantitative contributions to production. In contrast, socialist (or indeed any collective) activism was widely and successfully cast not only as personally risky but also as ultimately irrelevant to achieve the same goals. Thus, when socialism in the US defined ‘class’ and ‘classes’ in terms of groups of people with more or less wealth, and then defined its class programme as increasing the wealth of the working class, it missed more than Marx’s very different definition of class in terms of the surplus. By focusing on more and less wealth, US socialism damaged its chances of becoming a serious social force in the US.

Marx defined class across his major economic work, *Capital*, in terms of the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus. He sought to persuade readers of the gap between the enormous potential for human development of the rising surplus workers were producing and the failure to realise that potential by constricting production within its capitalist class structure. The capitalists who appropriated the surplus then distributed it, as *Capital*, Volume III showed in such detail, to certain people for specific purposes. Distributing the surplus enabled those capitalists to acquire and hold the political and cultural hegemony needed to secure their appropriation of the surplus. The mass of workers, productive and unproductive labourers alike, suffered both capitalist exploitation and that political and cultural hegemony.

Had US socialists grasped and applied Marx’s class analysis, they would have focused less on raising levels of consumption and more on contesting the social organisation of the surplus (contest ing precisely who appropriated it, to whom it was distributed, and for what purposes). Socialist strategies might have stressed less how the state should provide benefits beyond what workers’ wages allowed and rather more on how the workers should also be the appropriators and distributors of the surpluses they produced. Socialists might thus have heeded Marx’s notion that, beyond wage increases, what workers needed was an end of the wage system. They might then have defined a strategy capable of frustrating Adam Smith’s hope that rising consumption would compensate workers for their rising exploitation and the oppressive social hegemony it enabled. For a socialism that linked the accumulating
miseries of workers’ lives at work, at home, and in the civic and cultural arenas to the deepening exploitation of the capitalist workplace, rising wages would have posed fewer difficulties.

However unwittingly and unintentionally, the socialist and Marxist tendencies prevalent in the US helped to realise Adam Smith’s hopes for a secure capitalism. In other capitalist countries, rates of exploitation were either not accompanied by rising consumption or else such consumption simply did not compensate for or similarly deflect worker resistance to capitalist exploitation and the hegemony it financed. We suspect that this difference has helped significantly to account for their workers’ greater interests and participation in socialist movements generally. Socialism elsewhere has been a political force far stronger than in the US.

Yet here, too, our criticism of US socialism applies. In other capitalist countries, socialists also focused chiefly on wage levels, consumption levels, and the unequal distributions of productive property that were seen as their causes. Thus, they aimed at state power to redistribute productive property, more or less depending on each country’s traditions, to intervene in the economy in order to increase wages and mass consumption. The transformation of the social organisation of the surplus – from its capitalist to a communist form where the producers themselves collectively appropriated and distributed their surpluses – often faded from socialists’ agendas altogether (as unrealistic, unnecessary, or undesirable). Or it receded ever further into a murky utopian future worthy only of rhetorical gestures every May Day.

**US ‘economic crises’, capitalism and socialism**

Our central arguments may be summarised and extended by examining the strange history of conceptualisations of ‘economic crises’ in popular discourses, in formal economic analyses, and in the otherwise opposing political strategies of both supporters of capitalism and socialists. In the light of Adam Smith’s hopes for a viable capitalism, a crisis was easily defined. It consisted of any period of time in which workers would face extended decreases rather than increases in their standards of consumption. Falling workers’ consumption threatened their acceptance of capitalist exploitation by depriving them of the compensation for it. Individual consumption levels were the solace they had expected, that had been promised to them, and upon which they had displaced so many of their hopes for a better life. Capitalism’s champions
labelled as ‘crises’ those situations when workers’ real wages fell. They debated among themselves chiefly what remedies would best renew the upward march of workers’ consumption.

Some urged simply permitting or more completely freeing markets to self-correct as the surest mechanisms to resume the upward movement of real wages. Others, such as Keynes, feared the social costs and risks of waiting for market self-correction to occur. They favoured state actions, firstly, to compensate workers, temporarily or indefinitely, from state revenues for their fallen private wages and/or secondly, to stimulate/subsidise the private capitalists into a renewal of their ‘normal’ growth. Both groups were unequivocal in their devotion to capitalism as the necessary and optimal economic system; they differed only – although sometimes bitterly and urgently – on the best short-term response to what they saw as ‘crises’.

Socialists have all too often shared this definition of crises and sometimes even equated them with ‘breakdowns’ of capitalism. They then differed from the procapitalists seeking state interventions only by demanding greater compensation for distressed workers and more intrusive state intervention. The more left-wing socialists sometimes took this perspective another step. They demanded state take-overs of private capitalist enterprises and state planning in place of markets. Some went so far as to define state ownership and planning as socialism or even as the achievement of communism.8

Ironically, these socialist understandings of capitalist crises seemed to agree with and thus reinforce Adam Smith’s view that capitalism’s viability depended on compensating workers with rising real wages. In the absence of such compensation, capitalism was in trouble. When capitalist economic downturns evolved into upturns and renewed upward movement in real wages, those favouring capitalism rejoiced and relaxed while socialists wondered how another capitalist crisis had avoided ‘breakdown’. Repeated cycles eventually rendered socialists’ depictions of capitalist crises as incipient breakdowns decreasingly persuasive and hence politically ineffective. Breakdown shrank ever further into a murky distant future. Socialism and socialists seemed less relevant to capitalism even in its crisis periods. In the minds of the workers that the socialists sought to persuade and in many of their own minds as well, instead of a social transition from capitalism to something very different (socialism or communism) what became the ‘more realistic’ objective was

8 Resnick and Wolff 2002, Chapter 3.
state intervention to make capitalism’s economic downturns shorter, shallower, and less painful. Socialism’s response to the crises of private capitalism thus retreated to greater or lesser doses of state capitalism, a kind of melding of Keynesianism and socialism. The term ‘state capitalism’ applies because what remained little changed was the capitalist organisation of the surplus yielded in production. It continued to be produced by workers while it was appropriated and distributed by others. These appropriators were either private capitalists subjected to significant state interventions or, in extreme cases, they were state officials who had replaced the private capitalists.9

Marx’s theory of capitalist crisis was different. He made it quite clear that capitalism normally entailed sequential downswings and upswings. It was a highly unstable economic system that responded to its recurring problems by periodic ‘creative destructions of its capital’ through downward spirals of recession and depression. Bankruptcy, unemployment, deflation, and disaccumulation were the costly but generally effective means of reorganising capitalist enterprises for a next period of growth and prosperity. During the downward phase, workers would typically suffer lower standards of consumption. But Marx stressed that these cycles were not crises of capitalism as a system, but rather its normal mechanisms of correcting imbalances built up in its normal functioning. No necessity linked cycles to capitalism’s breakdown, let alone to any socialist or communist transition.

For capitalism to face a crisis in Marx’s view meant that a variety of economic, political, and cultural shifts would have to coalesce and condense such that the particularly capitalist class organisation of the surplus was threatened. Cyclical downturns – including periods of real wage decreases – were neither necessary nor sufficient conditions to constitute such a threat. Indeed, Marx’s goal in developing his analysis of capitalism was precisely to expose the social organisation of the surplus (exploitation especially) as central to workers’ suffering. Exploitation, he argued, was an immediate source of suffering (alienation) in itself, while it also contributed to a host of other burdens (the phenomenon of periodically falling real wages was but one).

The socialist strategy emerging from Marx’s perspective would have entailed a cultural, political, and economic movement exposing exploitation and its unacceptable social costs. Its social agenda would have stressed transition to a system of production organised such that the workers collectively

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9 Resnick and Wolff 2002, Chapter 4.
appropriated and distributed the surpluses they produced. Capitalist cycles and their real wage declines would then have merely been particular moments influencing how socialists framed their arguments and adjusted their political work. Cyclical real wage declines would not have figured as the central issue as it has for those sharing Adam Smith’s notion of what constituted a capitalist crisis.

Socialists would then have ridiculed the notion that real wage increases had ever or could ever compensate for the social costs of exploitative class structures. Especially in the US, socialists might then have engaged the actual capitalist trajectory of their society, one in which rising rates of exploitation were accompanied by rising rates of individual worker consumption much of the time. By exposing the immense and diverse economic, political, and cultural costs of exploitation, such a socialist movement might have taken effective political advantage of capitalism’s vulnerability notwithstanding the US’s long-term rising real wages (see Chart 1).

**Conclusion**

Capitalism in the US achieved its pre-eminent security and ‘success’ because the resistance and antagonism that exploitation provokes were sufficiently diverted into the one channel that capitalism could accommodate. Politically and culturally, US capitalism did much to make rising levels of individual consumption the highest value, the ultimate key to all of life’s satisfactions and pleasures, and the solution to social problems. Economically, it delivered those rising levels to enough of the population, albeit unevenly with recurring interruptions. Thus, despite its staggering social costs, US capitalism could and did realise a stunning long-term rise in the rate of exploitation. The stupendous, rising flow of surplus appropriated by the capitalist corporations’ boards of directors enabled the vast and growing ranks of the unproductive workers. The latter were paid to facilitate growing exploitation in countless ways. These included deflecting resistance to exploitation into the world’s most hysterical mass accumulation of individual consumer goods.

The toll taken on workers’ lives has been profound, and never more than at present. Stressed and collapsed household class structures, severe psychological and physical strains, civic isolation and personal loneliness, violence and despair are US capitalism’s weaknesses and failures just as surely as rising rates of exploitation and real wages are its successes. The opportunities
for a socialist critique to be embraced are therefore abundant in the US. Responding to those opportunities will require a shift away from defining class in terms of wealth and property and away from programmes focused too narrowly on raising real wages. That plays to US capitalism’s strength and not its weaknesses. Of course, low wages, poor working conditions, and job insecurities will remain targets of socialist critique, but eradicating them will be only part of a renewed socialism. Much the greater part will connect the dominant organisation of the surplus – capitalist exploitation – to the host of profound problems and sufferings now experienced by the mass of US citizens. Such a socialism would make the end of exploitation an indispensable component of its programme and vision. To paraphrase the old man once more: not higher wages but the abolition of the wage system is the point. To demand less for the victims of capitalist exploitation would be the equivalent of demanding better rations for the slaves rather than the abolition of slavery.

References


A recent electronic search yielded fifty-one books with the word ‘whiteness’ in their titles, almost all published in the last decade and most within the last five years, and three hundred and seventy-three articles published since 1985 with ‘whiteness’ in their titles, citations, or abstracts.\(^1\) Admittedly the list is imperfect, since it contains works relating to physical science and omits some that do not contain the word in their titles, and the count has increased since the tally was made; nevertheless, it reflects an explosion of awareness in the academy of the social and historical dimension of whiteness. Some of this work is postmodern silliness, verging on self-parody. Nevertheless, the effort to analyse race, and the white race in particular, as a social category offers a great deal to those interested in working-class politics.

Among scholars, it was W.E.B. Du Bois who first called attention to the problem of the white worker. In a 1932 essay, he recounted an incident where white American trade unionists, helped by the Labour Party acting in the name of labour solidarity, drove black workers from jobs building a new British Embassy.

\(^1\) Kolchin 2002, p. 154.
in Washington. ‘Black brothers,’ he asked, ‘how would you welcome a dictatorship of this proletariat?’ In *Black Reconstruction in America*, he wrote of ‘the subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over . . . by the insistence of white labor’. By the insistence of white labour . . . Not acquiescence, but insistence. And why did the white labourers act as they did? Not because they were backward or misled, but because they were rewarded with what he called ‘a public and psychological wage’.

As a matter of survival, the direct victims of white privilege have always studied it. Black Americans, in particular, have long understood that the white race is not a biological but a social formation, whose existence depends on its members’ willingness to reproduce it through their actions. The 1960s brought a new generation of radicals who, influenced by worldwide movements for national liberation and the high tide of black struggle in the US, sought to address the white problem. After 1967, the idea gained currency within SDS, for better and for worse, that white supremacy constituted the principal internal barrier to revolution in the US and that the struggle against it was the key to revolutionary strategy. But it lost much of its hold in the 1970s, and, moreover, was detached from its class moorings, leaving only a semantic residue among diversity consultants and other debris left on the beach after the revolutionary tide receded. And then, in 1990, Alexander Saxton published *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, and, a year later, David Roediger published *The Wages of Whiteness*, which reawakened interest in the white problem. Roediger, in asking why some people wanted to be white, and attempting to identify the historical moment when they became so, captured the imagination of readers. Saxton’s and Roediger’s studies were followed by one by Theodore Allen, on which he had been working on for many years, and by my own *How the Irish Became White*.

What these works have in common, and what distinguishes them from some other studies of whiteness, is that they take the class struggle as their starting point, and seek to explain why some members of the working class act in the interests of a group rather than the interests of a class, that is, as whites instead of as proletarians. One might expect labour historians in

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5 For a compilation of black writers looking at whiteness, see Roediger (ed.) 1998.
particular to welcome inquiry along these lines, but such has not proven universally to be the case. Eric Arnesen dismisses the new scholarship on whiteness, citing as evidence studies showing that ‘self-interest’ has sometimes ‘prompted organized labor to encourage collaboration across the racial divide’. He misses the point: the issue is not the willingness of white workers to take joint action with others to raise their own wages when they think it is to their advantage to do so; the issue is their clinging to a notion of themselves as a group with distinct interests. The following passage captures Arnesen’s worldview:

Only if one accepts . . . the ‘theory of laboring class unity’ . . . does the failure of white workers to recognize their common interests with blacks, their creation of a labor movement that excludes people of color, and their own embrace of white racial privileges require explanation. . . . The whiteness project becomes a variant on the question that will not die, the old ‘why no socialism in America’ [yes! – NI] – or at least the ‘why no working-class unity’ question. . . .

What is problematic is the very notion of unitary ‘common working-class interests,’ a notion that most labor historians, excluding whiteness scholars, have themselves jettisoned. . . . The problem is that at least some of Du Bois’s assumptions remain alive and well in the form of a persistent ‘Marxism lite’ – the expectation that common oppression or common enemies should promote unity, that all workers more or less share class interests regardless of race, and that the working class play the role of agent assigned to it by radical theory.  

Arnesen may reject the notion that the working class is the gravedigger of capitalism, but to label what he is rejecting ‘Marxism lite’ is to do violence to Marx. ‘The working class is revolutionary or it is nothing’. To Arnesen, it is nothing, a view that supremely equips him to conduct labour history classes for functionaries of US unions.

If Arnesen’s white-labour apologetics can be easily disposed of from a revolutionary perspective, there remain serious questions among those who seek to examine the effect of whiteness on the class struggle.

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8 Arnesen 2001, pp. 11–12.
As I write, I have just received the new edition of Saxton’s *Rise and Fall* with a foreword by Roediger in which, with characteristic modesty, he describes it as the best study of whiteness since *Black Reconstruction*. *Rise and Fall* recounts how white supremacy was adapted to serve the interests of successive ruling coalitions in the nineteenth century. To Saxton, white supremacy is ideology, a system of beliefs that rationalises experience so as to enable a particular group to present its interests as those of the entire society. He sees little difficulty in understanding how a belief in white superiority arose out of the need to justify a class that grew rich by enslaving Africans, expropriating Indians, and later on plundering Mexico and China. But why did non-property-holding whites acquiesce in racial ideology? The closest he offers by way of explanation is a remark that they did so because they ‘shared willingly, if not equally, in the profits of racial exploitation’. That assertion has been made before, but, to my knowledge, no one has ever explained how the profit-sharing takes place. To stand at the head of the employment line and the rear of the lay-off line and to hold a monopoly of the best jobs and mostly stay out of prison are certainly privileges, but they do not entail sharing in the profits (surplus-value) drawn from racial exploitation. In context, Saxton’s gliding over this issue is unimportant, because his argument does not depend on it. But it touches on political questions of importance to revolutionaries.

*Wages of Whiteness* errs in the opposite direction from *Rise and Fall*. Not wishing to suggest that white workers constitute an exploiting group in the literal sense, Roediger offers psychological and cultural explanations for their unproletarian behaviour. But there is a problem here, too, one which is the flipside of Saxton’s. Without an attendant material advantage, what would be the psychological value of the white skin? Again: to stand at the head of the employment line and the rear of the lay-off line and to hold a monopoly of the best jobs and mostly stay out of prison may not grant the white worker a share of the profits, but the pay is more than psychological. Roediger may be reacting against the Third-Worldist, anti-working-class currents that emerged in the last days of the New Left – here, I only speculate, as we have never discussed this. I do not know enough about psychoanalysis to venture a judgement on how much it can explain by itself. In his foreword to the new edition of *Rise and Fall*, Roediger refers to the ‘cruder monetary payoffs of white supremacy’. It may be – again, I only speculate – that he regarded these payoffs as so obvious they scarcely needed comment, but I wish he had talked
about them in *Wages*, because his stress on psychology and culture independent of market forces rendered him vulnerable to some of the shafts Arnesen aims at him.\(^9\)

While I would not choose to dispute the point, in my opinion, Allen’s is the best recent study of whiteness. First, Allen has provided a careful definition of racial oppression as a particular form of oppression in which a portion of the exploited class is enlisted in maintaining the rule of the dominant class through a system of privileges that elevate the most degraded member of the privileged group above *any* member of the oppressed group. Second, he has compiled a mass of evidence showing the origins of racial oppression – and hence the white race – in the colonial period. Third, he has provided a materialist explanation for the emergence of racial oppression, thoroughly refuting those who ascribe it to prior prejudice. Fourth, he has indicted the white-skin privilege system as the chief cause of the failure of the working class in the US to overturn capitalism. And he has accomplished all these things in two volumes that are exhaustively researched, rigorously argued, scrupulously fair to opponents, and unashamedly partisan. These are no small accomplishments, and I am sure there are others I have failed to mention.

Allen explains racial oppression as the result of conscious decisions made by the plantation bourgeoisie of the tobacco-growing regions of the Chesapeake in response to specific problems of labour control. One problem is the lack of documentary evidence: Here is an ‘invention’ more valuable to capital than the steam engine, the police force, and the two-party system – and the inventor is unknown. Allen acknowledges the lack, but asserts that it does not matter.\(^10\)

Is there a simpler explanation for the American colour line that does not attribute it to something in the English soul? In both mainland and West Indian colonies, people from Africa made up the slave-labour force, with the result that the black skin became the badge of slavery. The association between skin-colour and social status developed more slowly on the mainland than in the islands, because, initially, most mainland labourers were English, serving under temporary indenture, and lines between slavery and ‘freedom’ were indistinct and of little importance. The natural result was a great deal

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\(^9\) For a critique of Roediger’s psychoanalytic approach from a class-struggle standpoint, see Meyerson 1997.

\(^10\) Allen 1997, p. 274.
of interaction and solidarity among the labourers. But, as the planters imported more slaves – a decision motivated by purely monetary consideration, having nothing to do with ‘racial’ preference – and codified slavery as a distinct form, the association of the black skin with slavery came to loom large, and, by reflex, all those not of African descent, and therefore not slaves, came to constitute a group – or, in our terms, a race – on whose loyalty depended the stability of the social order.\textsuperscript{11} As for conscious decisions on the part of the Chesapeake planters to invent whiteness, \textit{je n’ai besoin de cette hypothèse.}

In the West Indies, the need to control vast numbers of slaves compelled the planters to enlist in the militia persons of African descent, thereby complicating the relation between colour and freedom. It was in the West Indies, and not on the mainland, that conscious decision was crucial, and records survive of the debates there. Allen writes, ‘Down to the last moment, and past it, the sugar plantocracy resisted any attempt to undermine that [white] consciousness . . .’\textsuperscript{12}

A crucial challenge facing those who look critically at race is to make sense of the ‘new immigrants’. (The quotation marks are there because many of those in question are neither new nor immigrants.) There are numerous signs that people from Asia and elsewhere may now be undergoing the whitening process that immigrants from Europe underwent in the past. Old-fashioned American colour prejudice is far from dead, but it is by no means obvious that Chinese, Mexicans, and even Ethiopians are subject to greater hostility from official society and the mass of American stupidos than were Irish and Italians in the past.

US political stability has traditionally depended on a majority held together by racial definition. Whiteness has served as a sort of disaster insurance for the ruling class. Of course, some groups occupy intermediate positions, sociologically: everyone knows that European-American ethnic groups vary in wealth and status; what makes them all white is their access to things from which others are excluded \textit{by racial definition}. The US may be multi-ethnic, but the traditional mode of class rule demands two \textit{races} and no more, the racially oppressed and the racially privileged. The day California or some other state develops a racially oppressed majority is the day the Rodney King

\textsuperscript{11} Not all persons of African descent in the Chesapeake were slaves, but the hardening of the colour line made the free Negro an anomaly. It was different in the West Indies, where \textit{free person of colour} designated a recognised social station.

\textsuperscript{12} Allen 1997, p. 244.
rebellion becomes permanent. The pitfalls of the multiracial model are exemplified by a recent book that hailed South Asian New York City cabdrivers as the ‘vanguard’ in the struggle against racism – just a few months before they were revealed to be a main force denying taxi service to black men. One might as well have hailed the 1863 New York City Irish as fighters against white supremacy for their determined opposition to nativist bigotry.

As in the nineteenth century, the white race is being recomposed and, as at that time, boundaries are not always clear. A great deal of the quarrel about ‘people of colour’ and ‘intermediate’ races has to do with determining which groups will be socially white in the twenty-first century. It has already been suggested that all that is missing for the reconfiguration of the dominant race is the appearance and general acceptance of a new term for everyone other than born-in-the-USA-blackfolk. Of course, the evidence can be read in several ways, and the outcome is not settled; what is needed is for people to look at the issue without assuming the conclusion as a premise.

Finally, the future of race itself is in doubt. In order for the white race to function effectively as a means of social control, the most degraded white man must feel himself socially superior to any person of colour who walks the earth – a feeling undermined by the existence of a desegregated ‘multi-racial’ propertied class. In this regard, too, the country is changing. There are now thousands of black millionaires. Evidently, a million dollars is not what it used to be, and there have always existed Afro-Americans of exceptional wealth; what is new is that many of them now operate outside the segregated Afro-American community. Black Americans now hold or have recently held positions on the Supreme Court, in the Cabinet, in Congress, as mayors of large cities, at the head of influential private foundations, and at the highest levels of the military. In 1996, a black man was widely touted as a candidate for President, and polls reported that, if he ran, he would be elected, by more white votes than black. These people exercise authority not merely over black people but over institutions that have been traditionally regarded as white. Not long ago, and not far away, the only time a black man or woman was seen in a public space was with a mop; today, black people stride through airports and corporate headquarters carrying briefcases and talking on cellular telephones. Perhaps the most visible and important sign of change is the

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13 Prashad 2000, p. 91.
black police officer. In 1940, there was not a single black policeman in any Deep South state and only a handful in Northern cities; now, there are black cops in major cities all over the country, and black police chiefs as well. They are even authorised to arrest white people. This is beyond tokenism.

Meanwhile, the New-Deal compact with the labour unions, which institutionalised the protected status of white labour, has collapsed. As a result, many whites find themselves living under conditions scarcely different from those of the black poor (as depicted in the recent film 8 Mile). There are signs that the US is becoming something like Brazil, where colour, instead of being an absolute marker of caste, is one element on a gradient, so that dark skins are to be found disproportionately at the bottom and fair skins at the top, and money whitens.

If white supremacy is the American counterpart of European social democracy, a compact between the ruling class and a portion of the working class – indeed, the US’s ‘historic compromise’ – its collapse is to be welcomed no matter the source. As John Garvey has quipped, maybe we should declare victory and go home. But the blurring of the colour line appears alongside growing immiseration and even marginalisation of a sector of the black population. Not only are Afro-Americans largely absent from growing areas of the economy, one hundred black men are in prison for every one who graduates from college – an ominous statistic. The decline of traditional forms of racial oppression, like any popular victory, gives rise to new problems; the question of working-class autonomy becomes even more crucial than in the past.

References


Alan Johnson

Equalibertarian Marxism and the Politics of Social Movements

... the authentic discourse of the dominated, ‘prior’ to any hegemonic use, cannot be isolated as such. It appears mainly as a forgotten origin, or is testified to not so much by actual words as by practical resistance, the irreducible ‘being there’ of the dominated.¹

This paper enquires into the relationship between social movements and what Étienne Balibar calls ‘the proposition of equaliberty’, which he sums up as ‘no equality without liberty, no liberty without equality’.² I argue that social movements per se, even the ‘new’ social movements that emerged in the 1960s, are not unambiguously a force for or against equaliberty. Rather, questions of social class and political strategy mediate the relation between social movements and equaliberty. The paper is a contribution to thinking about when, under what conditions, and through which organisational forms and strategies might a genuinely equalibertarian politics be pursued by social-movement organisations.

² Balibar 1994a, p. 47 and 1994b. I would like to thank two anonymous referees for their comments and the participants at ‘History Matters: Social Movements Past, Present and Future’, a conference held at the New School University, New York City, May 2003 for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper.
I advance my argument about equaliberty through a case study of Union Women’s Alliance to Gain Equality (Union WAGE), the first women’s liberation group of independent women trade unionists in the USA. In California, in 1971–2, Union WAGE struggled to save women’s protective labour laws from their anticipated abolition by the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as ‘sex-discriminatory’, by campaigning for what its founder, Anne Draper, called a ‘Labour ERA’, that is, legislation to ‘protect women workers gains by extending them to men’. Union WAGE warned that, unless the ERA was amended, it would ‘have the disastrous effect of also nullifying a large body of truly beneficial legislation covering women workers achieved over decades of struggle’. I argue that the Union WAGE strategy was a small example of equalibertarian politics and of what Balibar calls ‘ideal universality’, while the campaign by the National Organization of Women (NOW) for an unamended or ‘Pure’ ERA never escaped a liberal feminism at odds with equaliberty, an example of what Balibar calls mere ‘fictive universality’.

Introduction: the ‘Labour’ ERA vs. the ‘Pure’ ERA

California became the site for a sharp conflict within feminism over the ERA because so much was at stake. Ten per cent of the thirty million women workers in the US were employed there and the state possessed the nation’s largest body of protective legislation, ‘acquired and consolidated in painful struggles over most of a century’. With only one in five women workers

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3 The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a proposal to write into the American constitution the words, ‘Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex’. It was passed by the Senate in March 1972 but, despite an early rush to ratify, the ERA eventually died in 1982, three states short of the thirty eight required.

4 Anne Draper was born on 4 March 1917 in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. At the age of 15, she joined the Young People’s Socialist League and remained a member of the third-camp independent socialist tradition all her life. After working as a steelworker’s union organiser in the 1930s and as a welder in World War Two, she became a highly talented trade-union organiser, first for the Hatters’ and Millinery Workers’ Union, later for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. A founder of Citizens for Farm Labor, Labor Assembly for Peace and Union WAGE, Anne Draper died in 1973.

5 Quoted in Hal Draper 1976, p. 8.

6 Anne Draper 1972a, p. 1.

7 Hal Draper 1976, p. 5. California was unusual in this regard. In other states such as New York and Illinois the courts using Title VII of the Civil Rights Act eliminated similar legislation. There the immediate impact of a ‘Pure’ ERA was not so obvious. In California, it was ‘the drive for an ERA that business interests hope to use to break
unionised in the state, vast numbers of women relied on protective legislation for some humanisation of their working conditions, including women farm workers employed in agribusiness and the one hundred thousand women of the needle-trades in Los Angeles. Still intact for women workers in California were on-the-job benefits which included a minimum wage of $1.65 an hour, overtime pay after eight hours a day or forty hours a week, lunch-breaks of not less than thirty minutes in five hours, rest periods of ten minutes every four hours, and provisions for standards of cleanliness, lighting, ventilation, temperature, drinking water, and toilets. In all, some fifty specific protections of women’s ‘health, welfare and safety’, each wrung from California’s Industrial Welfare Commission since 1913, were threatened by the ERA.

Union WAGE organised to support Assembly Bill 1710, introduced by Willy Brown to the California State Legislature. The Bill aimed to preserve for women, as well as extending to men and home workers, the benefits of genuinely protective legislation. However, these efforts were threatened by NOW’s push for a ‘Pure ERA’ to be passed at state level. As Hal Draper explained:

> At this point the issue was posed on a knife edge: if a state ERA were adopted before the Extension was won then there would be nothing to extend, for the sex-discriminatory labour laws would all be smashed by the state instrument. The union women [Union WAGE] concretized the immediate issue by presenting the following proposition to NOW . . . Join forces with us NOW to get the Extension legislation through. Then we – and organized labor, we pledge – will work all-out to put the State ERA on the books ( . . . ) [N]ever had the focal issue of the ERA been posed so sharply, as now, at this point. The ERA activists could get a quick State ERA which might benefit some career women, but only over the backs of the farm workers in the fields, the needle-trades workers in the Los Angeles sweatshops, the women in the paper mills and a million other ‘sisters’. NOW’s answer was to drive all-out to get the State ERA adopted as speedily as possible.\(^8\)

NOW did succeed in passing a ‘Pure’ ERA in California, while Governor Ronald Reagan vetoed ‘extension’ legislation (i.e. the ‘Labour’ ERA) with the words, ‘all the leading business interests in the state are against this bill’.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Hal Draper 1976, p. 16.
\(^9\) Quoted in Hal Draper 1976, p. 19.
The ‘Labour ERA’ failed. In 1972, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) invoked ‘business necessity’ to resist the extension of protective legislation to men and to remove protective legislation from women.\textsuperscript{10} By 1974, Union WAGE was reporting that the ‘invalidation of all of California’s fair labor legislation’ had resulted in ‘an increase in the rate of exploitation of women workers that is far more rapid then the rate of exploitation of the working class as a whole’.\textsuperscript{11} ‘Men and women in the fields and household occupations [now] have complete equality to work unlimited hours’ leading to a rise in ‘fatal industrial accidents’ while ‘total exhaustion destroys their health’.

The paper will first set out Étienne Balibar’s concept of equaliberty and stress its intimate relationship to the most important concept in Marx’s political thought, self-emancipation. In Part II, I claim that three politico-strategic ‘moves’ are required for an equalibertarian politics: a refusal to bracket out the despotism exercised through the dull compulsion of wage-labour; an insolent embrace of the needs principle of social justice; and a transitional or transformative political method. In Part III, I discuss the limits of new-middle-class social-movement practice by an investigation into Balibar’s concepts of ‘fictive’ and ‘ideal’ universality, a couplet linked to Marx’s contrast between a merely ‘political’ and a fully ‘human’ emancipation. I use these couplets to assess the competing strategies of NOW and Union WAGE. I end the paper with some conclusions regarding the importance for Marxist political theory of Balibar’s ideas, which I hold to be enormous, as well as their implications for the contemporary ‘anticapitalist’ or ‘alternative globalisation’ movement of movements.

\section*{I. Balibar and ‘the proposition of equaliberty’}

The ‘proposition of equaliberty’ does not denote the conceptual identity of equality and liberty but the political and historical fact that they can

\textsuperscript{10} ‘If the employer can prove that business necessity precludes providing these benefits to both men and women, then the state law is in conflict with and superseded by Title VII as to this employer. In this situation the employer shall not provide such benefits to members of either sex.’ (Federal Register, Volume 37, no. 65, p. 6836.)

\textsuperscript{11} Union WAGE 1974.

\textsuperscript{12} Union WAGE 1974. Although the ‘Labour’ ERA failed, Union WAGE was an inspiration to the socialist-feminist Women Liberation Unions which sprang up over the next few years across America and which became the basis of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW) (see Strobel 1992, Roth 2003).
only be realised together, as they ‘depend upon one another in practice’. A dynamic was unleashed by the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a universality which ‘expresses the principle . . . that the community . . . cannot exist as such, nor govern itself, so long as it is based on the subjection of its members to a natural or transcendent authority [or] on the establishment of constraint or discrimination’. One cannot have perfect civil liberty if discrimination, privilege and inequality of condition exist and nor can one have equality if despotism or monopolies of power exist: ‘Equal Liberty is, therefore, unconditional’.

Equalibertarian politics, claims Balibar, takes the form of ‘an unfolding of the self-determination of the people [demos]’, and a suppression of ‘that which separates the people from itself [from its own autonomy]’. Equaliberty cannot be achieved by ‘external, unilateral decision’, but ‘only reciprocally, only by mutual recognition’. In other words, for Balibar, equalibertarian politics is a politics of self-emancipation:

Equality implies a universal right to politics: a right of everyone on his or her own behalf . . . to become the ‘subject’ or agent of politics, setting out from the specific forms of his or her activity and life, from the old or new forms of constraint and subjection to which he or she is submitted . . . the famous rallying cry of the preamble of the rules of the International Association of Working Men (1864), ‘That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’ should be read as a faithful translation of the proposition of equaliberty, and consequently of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen.

However, Balibar argues, the ‘modern politics’ unleashed by the bourgeois revolutions has reached a limit point. The question now posed is how to go beyond ‘the abstract or generic concept of man’. Equalibertarian politics must now be based upon a radically new agenda: how to ‘inscribe the programme and the very name of equaliberty in singularities’:

the construction of social forms that are both egalitarian and libertarian does not go without saying; it is on the contrary . . . the political problem par

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13 Balibar 1994a, p. 39. The term is égaliberté in French, a contraction of equal liberty, and is derived from the Roman ‘aequa libertas’ (see Balibar 1994a, pp. 46–7 and p. 232, note 8).
excellence, and most often bristling with obstacles. . . . [W]hat this implies is the necessity of moving from the point of view of limitative, mutually exclusive rights to expansive, mutually multiplying powers.17

Equality/difference

Balibar’s insistence that the apparently mutually exclusive terms ‘equality’ and ‘liberty’ constitute in fact a dialectic – ‘equaliberty’ – has an affinity to those efforts within feminism, widespread since the mid 1990s, to synthesise or transcend the equality/difference debate. Nancy Fraser, among many others, has sought to push past the limiting horizon of equality/difference,18 blaming the impasse of contemporary feminism, as exampled by both post-structuralism and multiculturalism, on a doomed attempt to ‘elaborate a cultural politics of difference in abstraction from a social politics of equality’. Fraser argues that ‘cultural differences can only be freely elaborated and democratically mediated on the basis of social equality’ and so calls for a new politics of solidarity.19

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17 Balibar 1994b, p. 212.  
18 For a recent survey of the equality/difference debate, see Squires 2000. Angela Phillips has written that ‘the tension between calling for equal treatment or insisting on women’s special needs is one that remains at the heart of feminist dilemmas’ (Philips 1992, p. 210). Indeed, Nancy Fraser (1996, pp. 197–208) has periodised the development of second-wave feminism in terms of this tension, concluding that it remains feminism’s limiting horizon or ‘truncated problematic’, the transcendence of which is a condition of further advance. ‘Equality feminists’ sought to establish equality by putting women under the same measure as men, and accused the difference feminists of essentialising femininity in such a way that gender hierarchies were entrenched. ‘Difference feminists’ accused equality feminism of urging women to clone a competitive male model and thus ignoring women’s specific conditions of life and special needs, some suggesting femininity should be celebrated as the cornerstone of women’s identity. While the former tended to bracket out, in the name of equality, women’s different experiences and needs associated with childbearing, as Mary Midgley (Midgley 1988) has memorably put it, ‘going the whole atomist hog’, the latter tended to valorise, even spiritualise, in the name of difference, women’s separate sphere, hence entrenching the grounds of women’s oppression. A series of cramped and uninspiring ‘choices’ have been the result. For example Snitow, while accepting that equality feminism can mean ‘being a women is a liability’ because it builds its programme upon ‘the flatness and pretence of undifferentiated gender-free public space’, nonetheless fears ‘the romance of femaleness even more’ and so opts for ‘slipping the noose of gender, living for precious moments of the imagination outside it’ (Snitow 1994, p. 324). The equality/difference problematic, like the liberal construction of equality/liberty ‘involves double binds and . . . intractable dilemmas’ (Cohen 1994, p. 334).  
19 Fraser 1996, p. 207. By the mid-1990s, a wide range of feminists were expressing very similar concerns. Benhabib 1995 argued that much contemporary feminist theory was ‘bordering on incoherence’ because of a tendency to ‘a mindless empiricist
However, Judith Squires has observed that these efforts to move past equality/difference, while ‘compelling in theory’, have largely failed to elaborate any corresponding political strategy or policy agenda, opening up a damaging ‘discontinuity between theory and practice’.20

Herein is one of the pay-offs in studying protest episodes for political theory. Union WAGE can tell us something about what is involved in transcending the opposition ‘equality versus difference’ in practice. To advance an equalibertarian politics, Union WAGE made three intimately related politico-strategic ‘moves’. By (i) a refusal to bracket out the processes of exploitation and ‘real subsumption’ that occur under the ‘dull compulsion of economic relations’ and therefore (ii) an embrace of the needs principle of distributive justice, Union WAGE elaborated (iii) a ‘transitional’ or transformative politics. These three ‘moves’, I claim, are the necessary basis for an equalibertarian social-movement politics, because they push us past the ‘abstract generic concept of man’ that forms the absolute horizon of capitalist social logic and bourgeois right. I now examine each of these ‘moves’ and their inner relation.

celebration of all pluralities’, leaving it with neither a conception of collective agency in which resistance could be grounded, nor principles by which identity claims could be judged. Noting that identity politics, as it intersected with the politics of the redistributive welfare state, had furthered a process of ‘balkanisation’ in which group particularisms competed antagonistically for scarce resources, she argued that ‘we desperately need a new politics of civility and solidarity, robust enough in its vision to unite those social forces torn now by fragmentation and factionalism’, a politics involving the ‘creation of an enlarged mentality’, and ‘a new synthesis of collective solidarities’ (Benhabib 1995, pp. 34–9). Epstein 1996 argued that, while class polarisation was ‘proceeding rapidly in the United States and internationally’ the theory of radical democracy marginalised class while valorising a ‘new social movement theory’ that did not fit the actual social movements emerging in the mid-1990s which were busy confirming that ‘economic and social position remains a kind of baseline for politics’ (see also Anner (ed.) 1996, and Rowbotham 1998). Naiman 1996 argued that ‘left feminism’ had reached an ‘analytical impasse’ because, seeing ‘all men as the ultimate perpetrators and beneficiaries of gender inequality’, at a time when global capital is engaged in an all-out assault on all working people, it could not imagine a politics of social change. Macdonald 1990, while welcoming poststructuralism’s ability to break up the homogenous category ‘woman’, registered its near silence on the question of how to construct collective struggle for social change.

Williams 1983, Taub and Williams 1986, Scott 1997, Brown 1995, and Ackelsberg 1994 have been among those who have sought to transcend the equality/difference dichotomy in a manner prefigured in significant ways by Union WAGE.

20 Squires 1997, p. 136. For a detailed argument that US feminism became ‘disciplined’ by the academy and separated from political practice, see Messer-Davidow 2002. For a critique of the ‘predominantly class-based gap between a vital women’s movement and feminist theorising in the U.S. academy’ see Mohanty 2003.
II. Union WAGE and the struggle for equaliberty

II.i. *Bringing back in ‘dull compulsion’*

‘It is impossible to conceive and institute equality between human beings based on despotism’, declares Balibar.\(^{21}\) The point about the exploitation of wage-labour, of course, is that it *is* a relation of despotism, and is *therefore* a permanent structural limit to equaliberty. Balibar says property can be seen as ‘the very example of a right that has been turned back into, or that always tends to turn back into a privilege, and . . . this “regression” coincides with the installation of politics in a social constitution for which the role played by the rights of man is only that of a symbolic, founding reference’.\(^{22}\) Exploitation denies in practice the theoretical promise of equality contained in the labour contract and so is a ‘practical negation of freedom of expression’, and an illustration of the proposition of equaliberty (that is, of the inseparability, in practice, of equality and liberty).\(^{23}\) Furthermore, as Alex Callinicos has pointed out in his book *Equality*, exploitation sustains and furthers inequality by dictating both the inegalitarian measures capitalists *must* take to revive profitability, and the egalitarian measures governments *must not* take if the flow of profit is not to be severely disrupted.\(^{24}\)

Union WAGE pursued the ‘Labour’ ERA against the ‘despotism’ of capital. The fruit growers of California had always fiercely opposed protective legislation. Anne Draper recalled out how difficult it had been to win the most basic protective legislation for farmwomen:

> Arrayed against us were the banks, the insurance companies and of course the largest industry in the state, agribusiness – a four billion dollar industry which said it could not afford to pay $1 an hour minimum wage for farm women. . . . People like Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez and other farmworker leaders mobilised the support of men, women, and children working in the fields, plus allies from the trade union movement. Finally, [we] established the right of the farmwomen to have drinking water and . . . a toilet available in the field. It has been easier to get a toilet on the moon

\(^{21}\) Balibar 2002, p. 3.

\(^{22}\) Balibar 1994b, p. 215.

\(^{23}\) Balibar 1994a, p. 48. The ways in which sexual difference is mediated by property is not explored in Balibar’s work. He focuses only upon the ways in which ‘community’ mediates sexual difference (see Balibar 1992, pp. 57–8).

\(^{24}\) Callinicos 2000, pp. 67–8.
than in the fields of California. . . . Every employer group in California has sought to break down these industry orders.

Anne Draper’s concern was that the employers could exploit a ‘Pure’ ERA. To employ Nancy Fraser’s terms,\(^\text{25}\) Draper worried that, without the ‘extension’ legislation, the pursuit of recognition via the ERA – which she supported – could be used by the bosses to undermine the fight for redistribution:

Would it not be ironic if they could use as their façade, their front, a women’s group that says it is fighting for equality and for equal rights for women?\(^\text{26}\)

Reporting on a debate between Union WAGE and NOW before the state Senate Assembly Judiciary Committee on 17 April 1972, Anne Draper observed:

The proponents for immediate ratification of ERA [i.e. NOW] displayed a surprising ignorance of the state’s IWC orders and realities of working life. Their abstract discussion of the ‘right of women to refuse overtime’ revealed an abysmal ignorance of the powerlessness of most women workers under non-union conditions. One even proclaimed sweatshops to be a relic of the Victorian past.\(^\text{27}\)

‘To be free is to be able to resist any compulsion that destroys freedom’, notes Balibar.\(^\text{28}\) Anne Draper, by bringing back in the brute facts of ‘dull compulsion’, aimed to defend the worker’s need for happiness against the combination of economic ‘rationality’ and liberal ‘right’ that, as Marx said, valorises our ‘fragmented being’ as it degrades our ‘communal being’:

No workers should be treated in the dehumanizing and vicious way that a lot of industry treats them. We are not beasts of burden. If we can figure out how to get a machine to move with 9,000 parts that work beautifully, then we ought to be able to figure out machines that do the weight lifting for both men and women on the job. We asked for reasonable limits of hours for both men and women. We don’t want to see women fighting for a return to the ten- or twelve-hour day. We want to see a five- or six-hour day.\(^\text{29}\)

In Balibarian terms, Union WAGE were ‘reopening the dialectic of property’. By refusing to accept that labour was to be defined as merely a commodity

\(^{25}\) Fraser 1996.
\(^{26}\) Anne Draper 1972 (quoted in Hal Draper 1976, pp. 17–18).
\(^{27}\) Union WAGE 1972.
\(^{28}\) Balibar 1994a, p. 44.
\(^{29}\) Anne Draper 1972b.
to be bought and sold, Union WAGE raised the question of the ‘citizen in the enterprise’. Equaliberty requires ‘a regulation of the conditions in which the right of property is exercised’.

By refusing to bracket out these relations of exploitation, Union WAGE were able to contest those conditions, occupy the ‘ground of social equality’, and pose Balibar’s question: how can difference be embraced on that ground? How can equaliberty be inscribed in singularities? The political insolence which flows from taking seriously Marx’s ‘real human being’ was part of the answer. John Henning, Secretary of the California AFL-CIO recalled Anne Draper’s testimony against the growers at state legislature hearings:

The Growers came up one after another and cited their arguments of protest. [T]hey did not deal with the question of the workers needs; they dealt only with the economic disability that the law [a minimum wage] would visit on the growers. We were at first outraged by this, but it was Anne Draper who stood and said ‘What the growers are arguing is this, that the survival of their system requires the exploitation of human beings. Therefore the system is morally wrong’.

In other words, before recognition/redistribution or equality/liberty, could be mediated, the question of property had to be reopened. In this ‘move’, Union WAGE reached for a different currency of distributive justice, one that pointed beyond the principle of total possession and exclusive disposal of labour by property, and the ‘business-first’ principle of the growers’ system. Union WAGE reached for the needs principle.

II.ii. The needs principle

The Marxist critique of ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘human rights’ hinges upon the fact that liberalism attaches opportunities and rights to a fictional isolated monad, abstracted from determining social relations. Consequently, such rights are the rights, ‘of the circumscribed individual’, of ‘egoistic man’, of the individual ‘separated from the community’ and tied to others only by ‘private interest’. Marx’s objection to this, as Amy Bartholomew has highlighted, was that, ‘none of the rights of man address or embrace communal or social concerns, human sociality or species being’. In this atomistic conception,

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30 Balibar 1994b, pp. 216–18.
32 Bartholomew 1990, p. 274.
said Marx, individuals are ‘taken from one side only’ (as Bobbio has it, ‘individuals uti singuli’). bracketed out are all those ‘attributes, needs, social contexts, relationships and the like’ which mediate between a right and the meaning of a right from the absence of economic power to the presence of a newborn baby. Marx rejected this atomistic individualism in the name of rich individuality and the needs principle.

The ‘needs principle’ is that standard of distributive justice set out by Marx in ‘The Critique of the Gotha Programme’, ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his need!’ This principle, as Callinicos has observed, is remarkably similar to Amartya Sen’s notion of ‘equality of capabilities’. For both, the whole point about equality is to enable difference to flourish. For Marx:

Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard: but unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only, for instance are regarded only as workers and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored. Further, one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on and so forth. . . . To avoid all these defects right instead of being equal would have to be unequal.

Balibar, in similar vein, directs our attention to the inadequacy of the language of ‘equality’ and ‘liberty’ to those differences. Sexual difference, for instance, ‘cannot be overcome by the institution of equality’. Sexual difference is ‘other than inequality, even though . . . always inscribed in a relation of power’. Liberation, therefore, demands a ‘right to difference in equality’. It will never be adequate to institute a ‘neutralization of differences in the equality of rights’ but rather it will be necessary to produce ‘an equality without precedents or models, which would be difference itself, the complementarity and reciprocity of singularities’.

This notion of ‘equality without precedents’ can also be found in Galvano Della Volpe’s thought. Far from the reduction of equality to sameness, Della Volpe discerned in Marx an anti-levelling egalitarianism and a desire to

33 Bobbio 1990, p. 34.
34 Bartholomew 1990, p. 274.
36 Balibar 1994a, p. 55.
37 Balibar 1994a, p. 56.
formulate anew and resolve Rousseau’s injunction that ‘everything depends on not spoiling the natural man [i.e. the free individual] while appropriating him to society’.  

The ‘Labour’ ERA campaign refused to ‘take people from one side only’, as abstract ‘citizens’. It sought, instead, to integrate Marx’s critique of bourgeois right from a class perspective, (bringing back in the needs of the worker), with a critique of bourgeois right from a gender perspective, (bringing back in the needs of the woman). Rather than bracket out any of the ‘attributes, needs, social contexts, relationships’ of women’s lives, Union WAGE foregrounded the ‘double burden [women] must carry – as workers and as women’ and argued that satisfying women’s different needs such as child care and maternity leave was the precondition of establishing her equal rights. After Anne’s death in 1973, her husband Hal Draper summed up her argument:

the word equal need not be turned into a code-word meaning same and identical . . . [because] for women to enjoy equal rights with men, they must have equal opportunity to be different. It is a male-sexist mindset to believe that maternity (for example) is an impermissible deviation from normal human conduct.

Balibar writes in similar vein:

One can desire, as a condition of their freedom of action, that women should have ‘equal rights’, equal access to knowledge, to the professions, to public responsibilities (which supposes a more or less profound transformation of the conditions in which they are exercized); one cannot think that they thenceforth act as generic individuals.

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39 Anne Draper 1973, p. 2. In her opposition to the NOW strategy, Anne Draper arguably failed to fully confront gender as a cultural construct expressed in the ideology and lived experience of the ‘two spheres’. This was also true of the German Marxist Clara Zetkin, despite all her attention to the needs of women workers. And it was true of Marx and Engels. Marxism has much to learn from the revolutionary challenge to the ‘two spheres’ mounted by second-wave feminism. The release of sensuous particularity and the full richness of individual powers achieved by feminism – think only of the revolutionary transformation of the relations between men and children, for example – have been tremendous. The extension and democratisation of that partial emancipation must be at the heart of a contemporary equal libertarian Marxism. Marx was a nineteenth-century European. His views on gender and ‘race’ were advanced for his day, but he would, without question, have revolutionised his thought in light of the ‘real movement’ against oppression in the twentieth century.
40 Hal Draper 1987, p. 5.
41 Balibar 1994a, p. 56.
The Union WAGE approach anticipated Sen’s view that the currency of distributive justice should be ‘equality of capabilities’. Our aim should not be sameness but the empowerment of individuals to achieve the ‘beings’ (states) and ‘doings’ (activities) they value.\textsuperscript{42} Sen is following Marx, of course, who, as Terry Eagleton provocatively reminds us, was ‘not much interested in equality’:

To treat two people equally must surely mean not giving them exactly the same treatment but attending equally to their different needs. It is not that they are equal individuals but that they are equally individuals. And to this extent a reasonable concept of equality already implicates the notion of difference . . . universality exists finally for the sake of difference. Confronted with the ‘given’ differences of human beings, we must first abstract from these specificities so that all of them end up with equal political rights. But the point of that abstraction is to move us to a ‘higher’ stage of difference, in which all individuals will now have the freedom, protection and resources they need to develop in their own ways. . . . Marx’s whole political ethic is devoted to releasing sensuous particularity, or the full richness of individual powers, from the metaphysical prison-houses of abstraction. It is just that he recognizes that if everyone’s unique difference is to be respected, this ethic must be universally extended . . .\textsuperscript{43}

A similar idea is at the heart of Balibar’s notion of equaliberty. ‘Equality’, he insists, ‘[should be] not the neutralization of differences (equalization) but the condition and requirement of the diversification of freedoms’.\textsuperscript{44}

However, it is one thing to ‘move to a higher stage of difference’ in which there is a ‘diversification of freedoms’ \textit{in theory}. But how can that higher stage be approached \textit{in practice}? What kind of politics can straddle this present and that future and so facilitate a transition/ transformation?

\textsuperscript{42} Sen 1999. For discussions of the manner in which Sen links liberty and equality see Callinicos 2000, pp. 58–85 and Nussbaum 2000. See also Ackelsberg’s 1994, p. 83, call for a feminist welfare policy to pursue not independence but the achievement of ‘relationships of meaningful interdependence and mutuality’.

\textsuperscript{43} Eagleton 1996, pp. 117–18.

\textsuperscript{44} Balibar 1994a, p. 56. A similar refusal to reduce equality to sameness in favour of a valorisation of ‘infinite multiplicity of free and creative singularities’, can be found in Negri 1999, pp. 330–1.
II.iii. Transitional or transformative politics

...it will always be necessary in practice to construct individual and collective referents for equaliberty, with more or less ‘prudence’ and ‘precision’ but also ‘audacity’ and ‘insolence’ against established powers. There will be a permanent tension between the conditions that historically determine the construction of institutions that are in conformity with the proposition of equaliberty, and the hyperbolic universality of the statement. Nevertheless it will always be necessary for this universality to be repeated, and to be repeated identically, without change, in order to reproduce the truth-effect without which there is no revolutionary politics.\(^{45}\)

It is incontestable that, for the ‘needs principle’ to be the stable and accepted basis of a society, it would indeed be necessary for conscious sociality and mutual aid to have become widespread and deep-rooted after a long experience of co-operative and democratic social relations of production.\(^{46}\) But how to reach such new relations? How to avoid a mute opposition between a ‘logic of the present’ in which the needs principle is impossible and a ‘logic of the future’ that we cannot approach? The dilemma is summed up in Ann Snitow’s explanation of why, in her view, the equality/difference tension can never be transcended: ‘its not that we haven’t gotten beyond classical liberalism in theory but that in practice we cannot live beyond it’.\(^{47}\)

‘Transitional’ politics might be thought of as an attempt to ‘live beyond’ classical liberalism by fighting with a combination of prudence and insolence in the here-and-now for the needs principle against established powers. The idea of the transitional political method can be traced to the Communist Manifesto: ‘Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present they also represent and take care of the future of the movement’.\(^{48}\) Hal Draper’s survey of Marx’s political thought finds much evidence of a ‘transitional’ approach:

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\(^{45}\) Balibar 1994a, p. 50.
\(^{46}\) Marx saw the ‘needs principle’ as a standard of distributive justice belonging to the future society ‘as it has developed on its own foundations’. He did not think it capable of achievement in capitalist society on any stable basis because, Marx again, ‘Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby’ (Marx 1969, p. 19).
\(^{48}\) Marx 1973, p. 97.
If the future reality is to develop out of the contradictions in existing society, if the ‘social truth’ will develop out of conflicts within the existing political framework, then certainly the latter cannot be ignored as the socialists had been doing. The new direction, Marx argues, means that \textit{a connection must be made with the real politics of the day}, with what people are really concerned about. And it can be done, he insisted, without impugning our principles.

This approach was further developed in the ‘Theses on Tactics’ adopted by the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921 which, as Norman Geras has pointed out, was elaborated in ‘conscious opposition to the economism of its predecessor [the Second International]’.\textsuperscript{50} The Third Congress called for a focus upon ‘the concrete needs of the proletariat’. What mattered was collective organisation to fight for ‘a system of demands’ each of which ‘expresses in itself the need of the broadest masses’ and which ‘in their totality disintegrate the power of the bourgeoisie’.\textsuperscript{51} The \textit{Transitional Programme}, written in 1938 for the fledgling Fourth International has this political method at its heart.\textsuperscript{52}

The transitional approach to politics rests upon a wager that a fight for \textit{present} needs conducted without regard for the ‘needs’ of capital, and without regard to what will be defined as ‘utopian’ in capitalist terms, can be the bridge to the \textit{future} society.\textsuperscript{53} The hope is that two effects will follow from

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} Hal Draper 1977, p. 106 (emphasis added).
\item \textsuperscript{50} Geras 1976, p. 127.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Adler (ed.) 1980, pp. 388–400.
\item \textsuperscript{52} In conversation about the transitional method with leaders of the US Socialist Workers’ Party in 1938, Trotsky reached for the principles of justice that ‘belong’ to a \textit{future} society in order to inspire the \textit{fight} for that society \textit{today}. Thus: ‘we ask for work for everybody under decent conditions—in a popular form: “We must find work for all, under decent conditions with decent salaries”’. Again: ‘if we present the whole socialist system it will appear to the average American as utopian, as something from Europe. We present it as a solution to this crisis which must assure the right to eat, drink and live in decent apartments. It is the program of socialism, but in a very popular and simple form’. The American Trotskyists addressed the question of unemployment in the 1930s by the demand ‘30 for 40’, i.e. thirty hours work for forty hours pay, as a means to \textit{unite} employed and unemployed on the basis of the \textit{needs} of both, ignoring the ‘needs’ of profit (Breitman (ed.) 1973, pp. 48, 159, 188). The isolation of the postwar Trotskyists in extremely difficult objective circumstances often produced a fetishistic and sectarian use of the letter of Trotsky’s actual 1938 \textit{Transitional Programme} rather than a creative development of the method itself. ‘Demands’ per se, do not possess an independent value. For one contemporary use of the transitional political method, see Callinicos 2003.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Equalibertarian Marxism would view the principle of self-emancipation as the essential core of Marxist political theory and so view Marxism as yoked to the Interest not the Idea, and to majoritarian Critique not minoritarian Blueprint. It would consequentially view mass self-organised participation in the democratic republic as the true barrier to the danger of authoritarian degeneration rather than a liberal renunciation
\end{itemize}
such a fight: the construction of a new collective actor and the prefiguration of a new social and ethical ‘logic’. As such, the transitional approach is sensitive to Nancy Fraser’s warning that ‘needs talk’ can be either emancipatory or repressive. Within a transitional or transformative political framework, what Fraser calls ‘oppositional forms of needs talk’ can arise, ‘politicized from below’ and so able to contribute to ‘the crystallization of new social identities on the part of subordinate social groups’.

This hope certainly shone brightly in Anne Draper. She envisaged, in terms reminiscent of Rosa Luxemburg’s writings on German social democracy of the early twentieth century, that the struggle for working women’s needs, and the effort to force the male-dominated unions to ‘give way before these pressing need[s]’ would shake up and transform the entire labour movement:

the pressure of need will burst through the present union framework, just as the CIO, in its day, had to explode out of the existing union framework, in order to do what had to be done. In either case a new kind of union will have to be built. . . A storm is brewing. The dynamic thrust of women organizing on the job will shake up the corroded bureaucratic apparatuses that want to restrain the swelling rank-and-file movement; it will break through the encrusted layers of the entrenched establishment. The women’s component of the trade union movement can be the cutting edge of its struggles; if it is given its full scope, it can weld together the brotherhood and sisterhood of unionism on a higher level.

This ‘higher level’ is the terrain upon which equaliberty can be inscribed in singularities. When ‘put-down-men’-type feminism and ‘put-down-women’-type trade unionism can be pushed aside, then an alliance between the labour movement and the women’s movement might win Extension legislation and a state ERA. Union WAGE activists described this approach as a:

. . . fight on two fronts. On one front [Union WAGE] has had to fight to make the unions responsible to the millions of their members who are

of revolution (see Johnson 2000). Balibar (1994a, p. 43) puts the basic point thus: ‘As far as sovereignty is concerned . . . the revolutionary innovation consists precisely in subverting its traditional concept by posing the highly paradoxical thesis of an egalitarian sovereignty, practically a contradiction in terms, but the only way radically to expel all transcendence and to inscribe the political and social order in the element of immanence, of the auto-constitution of the people’.

54 Fraser 1989, p. 171.
55 Anne Draper 1973, p. 5 (emphasis added).
women . . . and aware of the demands and needs of the unorganized majority of working women. Despite the commitment on paper to defending protective legislation the official trade union movement has moved on the issue only when pushed to do so. . . . On the second front, we have to fight within the women’s movement, not just for due recognition of the needs of working women, but even more important for the recognition of the importance for working women of winning a voice and a measure of power in the one institution which they can use to defend their interests – the union.  

Anne Draper looked to the workplace and not the home as the crucible of collectivism and joint struggles across and against sexual and racial divisions. She did not deny the reality of women’s oppression in the home, but argued that, in the workplace, the idea of the ‘boss/husband’ was undermined while men were repositioned as ‘other workers with whom there exists a potentiality of joint struggle’ . Women workers’ particular needs as women could be tackled alongside male workers. Paid on average only 59 cents to the men’s dollar, women also faced the double-burden of combining work and motherhood, raising the question of the social provision of childcare, maternity leave and protective laws. Consequently she sought to foster:

... joint struggle not only for the needs of all workers as such but also for the needs of women workers in particular – just as the workplace raises the question not only of struggle for workers’ demands in general but also for (say) black workers demands in particular. These needs and demands and issues are raised in the work-place struggle, even though they will not be solved or won except by an advanced militant consciousness; but they are not raised in the home/sex struggle of wife versus ‘boss’ husband.  

III. Equaliberty contested

The meaning of the conflict between the liberal-feminist National Organization of Women and the socialist-feminist Union WAGE is illuminated by Balibar’s notion of the ‘heteronomy of politics’ and by the contrast he draws between ‘fictive’ and ‘ideal’ universality. But the fact of the conflict – and its typical character within social movements – undermines, I claim, Balibar’s assessment

56 Union WAGE n/d.
57 Anne Draper 1973, p. 3.
58 Ibid.
of the equalibertarian potential of social movements per se and points to the continuing importance of the concept of class for a critical understanding of social movements.

III.i. The heteronomy of politics

Politics, says Balibar, is irreducibly marked by ‘heteronomy’. In other words, there is never agreement on ‘the constitutive conditions of politics’ (that is, the precise nature of the ‘outside’ which structures and conditions politics). And how we conceive those conditions will shape decisively how we act politically. NOW and Union WAGE held competing conceptions of the ‘constitutive conditions of politics’, with profound consequences for their respective political strategies. For Anne Draper and Union WAGE, the ‘other’ of politics was capitalism and its central social relationship of wage-labour and capital:

we were women who had learned to think of ourselves as women workers, who, like all other workers, required a social and collective effort to solve their problems; who would be raised in status not by rising out of their class but with their class. In the subsequent months we were going to learn how explosive this simple concept was, in the face of the ‘Sisterhood Is All’ mood.  

Their understanding of the ‘constitutive conditions of politics’ led Union WAGE to:

put . . . the spotlight on a goal which is unfortunately alien to the feminist ‘star’ movement: the goal of integrating the women’s liberation movement and the women’s trade-union movement – integrating the organization of women against social exploitation (sexism) and the organization of women against economic exploitation.  

III.ii. NOW and fictive universality

‘Are women economic men?’ asks Nancy Holstrom. Her rhetorical question is to our point, for it shines a light upon the importance of Balibar’s distinction between three instances or forms of universality. The first (to which we shall

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60 Anne Draper 1973, p. 4.
61 Holstrom 2000, p. 72.
return in the conclusion) he terms ‘universal as reality’, that stage in human history that opened up with modernity and has produced a complex and interdependent *world system*. The second and third instances of universality – ‘fictive universality’ and ‘ideal universality’ – and the contrast between them, are powerful conceptual tools with which to interrogate divisions within social movements.

The concept of ‘fictive universality’, like Marx’s notion of a ‘merely political emancipation’, denotes those forms of universality which are a ‘big leap forward’ from the precapitalist inequalities of birth, rank, and privilege but which, nonetheless, remain incomplete and recuperable. Moreover, the ideological representations of fictive universality, warns Balibar, while also progressive against feudalism, can function to symbolically construct a ‘normal’ autonomous individual and thus help integrate an exploitative and oppressive social order by leading dominated groups to ‘struggle against discrimination or inequality in the very name of the superior values of the community: the legal and ethical values of the state itself . . .’.⁶² Fictive universality combines ‘the liberation of individual subjectivity from narrow communitarian bonds’ – a positive development – with ‘the imposition of a normal – that is, normative and normalized – pattern of individual behaviour’.⁶³ Balibar defines this process of ‘normalization’ thus:

. . . not the simple fact of adopting customs and obeying rules or laws: it means internalizing representations of the ‘human type’ or the ‘human subject’ (not exactly an essence but a norm and a standard way of behaving) in order to be recognized as a person in one’s own right – to become presentable (fit to be seen) in order to be represented. To become responsible (fit to be answered) in order to be respected.⁶⁴

Have some of the fruits of individualistic liberal feminism not been an eloquent testimony to the power of Balibar’s critique of a merely ‘fictive universality’? Along with all the tremendous gains, has there not also been a process of Balibarian ‘normalization’? Consider, for example, the case of Lillian Garland. In 1982, Garland, a bank worker in the USA, found, on her return to work after giving birth, that the bank had given her job to somebody else and had no other work for her. When the lack of income led to her eviction and the

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⁶⁴ Balibar 2002, p. 163.
lack of a home led to her losing custody of the child to its father, she took the bank to court. When the state decided that the bank had acted illegally, ignoring a Californian law which should have entitled her to four months unpaid leave with job maintenance, the bank, joined by the Chamber of Commerce, the Merchants’ and Manufacturers’ Association, and the National Organization of Women, successfully challenged the Californian law in question as ‘sex-discriminatory’. A strikingly clear example of ‘fictive universality’ and Balibarian normalisation was the response of Senator Dianne Feinstein to the Garland case:

What we women have been saying all along is we want to be treated equally. Now we have to put our money where our mouth is. What we were asking was to create a special group of workers, that, in essence, is pregnant women and new mothers. I just don’t happen to agree with that. I don’t think the work market has to accommodate itself to women having children.

Feinstein’s liberal feminism, I would suggest, illustrates Balibar’s point that ‘fictive universality . . . regresses toward particularism . . . to become another form of one-dimensional identity’. She certainly confirms Balibar’s warning that a merely fictive universality can function to reinforce the ‘discourse of hegemonic domination’.

Balibar is recasting a much older distinction, found in Marx’s essay ‘On the Jewish Question’, between a merely political form of emancipation – incomplete, limited and contradictory – and a fully human emancipation. Marx was clear that political emancipation was a tremendous advance. Balibar, likewise, has come to praise, not bury, fictive universality. There is no careless dismissal of liberalism in the thought of either thinker. In fact, the entire thrust of Balibar’s writings on equaliberty seems to concur with Andrew Levine’s recent thesis that, for Marx, unlike most later Marxists, ‘liberalism is not so much wrong as incomplete, and . . . is therefore insufficient for realizing the values the historical left drew from the Revolution in France –

66 Quoted in Hewlett 1987, p. 111. In 1971, when President of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Dianne Feinstein had opposed Union WAGE. For Anne Draper’s letter to Feinstein see Union WAGE 1971a, and for an account of the debate between NOW and Union WAGE at the State and National Affairs Committee of the Board of Supervisors in an ‘atmosphere made electric by women and men who realised a class struggle was taking place’ see ‘Union Women vs. NOW’ in Union WAGE 1971b.
68 Balibar 1994b, p. 46.
liberty, equality, fraternity’. But what both foreground is that – when sundered from the ‘fully human’ – the ‘merely political’ can produce, in Della Volpe’s words ‘an indifference to persons, to their diversity and originality’.

III.iii. Fictive universality and the new middle class

From all this, it seems clear that Balibar’s claim that the second-wave women’s movement is ‘the clearest modern example’ of equaliberty, a movement that inscribed equalities in singularities, is too simple by half. When NOW took the competitive male monad of liberal theory as the model of what women were to be equal to, then, in Balibarian terms, they were advancing a fictive universality, progressive but with the seeds of its own recuperation and distortion fully sown. Social movements, to be blunt, can be forces for ‘normalization’. The missing term from Balibar’s consideration of social movements is class and the myriad ways in which class position, class experience, and class relations condition the perception of the ‘constitutive conditions of politics’, shape the emergence of collective identity and action and mediate between a right and its meaning.

For who, after all, was the ‘we’ invoked by the Senator (Feinstein) to deny the Worker (Garland) her child, job, and home? What is the political relationship between new social movements, the post-war rise of the new middle class, and the danger of fictive universality? NOW grew out of the burgeoning female new middle class that was to dominate US feminism. In the 1950s, the female labour force grew strongly among ‘well-educated married women from families with moderate incomes’, the rate of female participation in households where the husband earned between $7,000 and $10,000 a year rising from 7 per cent in 1950 to 25 per cent in 1960. This revolution in female employment was ‘spearheaded by middle class wives and mothers’. NOW’s founders were the ‘older, more established [women] who came to the feminist movement through their participation in business and professional activities or commissions investigating the status of women’. These cadres from the American Association of University Women and the Business and Professional Women’s Clubs exhibited an ‘extraordinary middle and upper-class bias,

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69 Levine 2003, p. 167.
71 Chafe 1991, p. 188.
ignoring both the circumstances and aspirations of those women who were not white and not affluent’.73

Union WAGE members complained bitterly of the indifference of these professional women to the needs of working women:

NOW leaders boast about their ‘victories’ in destroying protective legislation. But such victories are paid for by the blood and sweat of working women. Professional, business and career women don’t toil in the fields and orchards of California when temperatures rise over 100 degrees. But for farm women drinking water, washing facilities and sanitary facilities are vital. . . . Employers and corporate interests are in an unholy alliance with business and professional women: the former want to destroy protective legislation since it is costly; the latter are indifferent if not hostile to the needs of women workers.74

Nancy Fraser has argued that feminism should not be thought of or practised as a self-contained social movement, as gender struggles occur ‘on the broader terrain of civil society’ involving ‘axes of subordination other than gender’.75 The point about NOW’s discursive construction of ‘equality’ was that it bracketed out ‘axes of subordination other than gender’ and so made of equality a synonym for sameness.

III.iv. Equaliberty and the ‘part of no part’

Balibar links the notion of ideal universality to the notion of an equalibertarian politics:

I called ideal universality the subversive element which the philosophers called negativity. . . . [S]uch a negativity goes beyond any institutional citizenship, by posing the infinite question of equality and liberty together, or the impossibility of actually achieving freedom without equality, or equality without liberty. I insisted on the fact that such an ideal of universality, which has emerged again and again throughout history (and therefore seems to

74 Anne Draper 1972a, p. 2 (emphasis added). This protest episode challenges those accounts of the relation between the working class and the ‘new social movements’ which just write out of the picture the class basis for tensions between the two, and which assume the ‘new social movements’ just are the working class in struggle. For instance, in Wilde 1990 (p. 67) the new social movements are defined as ‘protest movements within the working class’ while Sears and Mooers 1995 (pp. 227, 236) interpret ‘the demands of women’ as simply ‘class demands against capital’.
be irrepressible) is *transindividual by nature*. It is a question not of speaking the established language of politics, of ‘playing the game’ according to its well-known rules, but of collectively breaking through the limit of public communication by means of a new language.76

Ideal universality takes the form of a revolt against domination in the name of freedom and equality and, as such, introduces the notion of the unconditional into politics and so ‘appeals . . . to something heterogeneous to’ the dominant order.

Equaliberty is not advanced by ‘the formation of a universal consensus within the demos’ but rather through the revolt of ‘the part of no part’. The term, which Balibar takes from Jacques Rancière,77 refers to social groups that are excluded, dominated, or discriminated against. Such groups are a standing affront to equaliberty, a sign of the current ‘impossibility of constituting the demos as a totality’. Consequently, it is the self-assertion of ‘the part of no part’ – of the exploited and oppressed – that is the phenomenal form, the method of motion, in and through which a politics of equaliberty moves.

The apparently ‘particularistic’ demand for a ‘Labor’ ERA aimed to *broaden* the constituencies in favour of an ERA, *deepen* the radically democratic character of the ERA demand, and *articulate* the women’s movement and labour movement in common action. In contrast, NOW’s demand for a ‘Pure’ ERA, ostensibly made in the name of a universalistic citizenship, produced only an alliance between NOW, the despotic Growers and Governor Ronald Reagan. At the 1972 Convention of the State Federation of Labor, the contrasting results were seen in stark relief. The Los Angeles chapter of NOW demonstrated *outside* the hall with placards attacking the unions for their opposition to a state ERA without extension legislation. Inside the hall, women delegates, some of them Union WAGE members, were reaping the harvest of the ‘Extension’ campaign. Resolutions on equal pay, maternity leave, women’s representation in the leadership and day-care were debated and a resolution was passed instructing the state federation to set up a weekend conference of union women so that a comprehensive programme could be developed to tackle the discrimination women faced on the job. When the male leadership baulked before this demand, the women delegates waged a floor fight and

77 See Balibar 2002, p. 5; Rancière 1998.
won the conference, with its 90 per cent male delegates, to back the women’s demand.

Social movements often privilege the problem of formal legal and political ‘equality’ and bracket out the lived experience of real subsumption and dull compulsion. As Ellen Wood has pointed out, social movements often:

[leave] intact the liberal accommodation with capitalism, if only by evading the issue; . . . at the very heart of the new pluralism is a failure to confront (and often an explicit denial of) the overarching totality of capitalism as a social system, which is constituted by class exploitation which shapes all ‘identities’ and social relations.78

In short, the unilateral assertion of abstract equivalence can be a ‘normalising’ and so an exclusionary act, recuperable by capital. That was the awkward truth of NOW’s pursuit of a ‘Pure’ ERA in California.

**Conclusion: the proposition of equaliberty and the power to specify**

With ‘the proposition of equaliberty’, Balibar suggests a new research agenda for a Marxist political science. Marx brought the analytical power, historical sense, and political insolence of the determinate abstraction to bear upon the holy scriptures of classical political economy.79 With his ‘proposition of equaliberty’, has Balibar sketched something of equivalent analytical power, historical sense and political insolence for Marxist political theory? Could it help get us beyond the endless ‘platonizing reading of texts’, and the aprioristic treatment of ‘liberty’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’ and ‘democracy’ in the manner of the indeterminate abstractions of ‘Political Philosophy’ (and beyond the playing of discursive games with those struggles using the hypostatisation of ‘the democratic imaginary’)? The ‘proposition of equaliberty’ returns Marxist political theory to itself. For it is rooted in ‘the historical discovery, which can legitimately be called experimental, that their [equality and liberty] extensions are necessarily identical’. As such, it forces Marxists to focus upon concrete empirically oriented research into ‘the application, the passage from

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79 For the notion of the ‘determinate abstraction’, see Della Volpe 1980.
“theory” to “practice” of a proposition that has come out of (revolutionary) practice itself.  

For example, the proposition of equaliberty forces Marxist political theory to engage in substantive analyses of economy and society. For it is upon the terrain of the actually existing world system (‘universality as reality’ to use Balibar’s term) that the achievement of equaliberty must be commenced. The character of this terrain – its laws of motion, institutional landscape, the capacities of its collective actors – specifies the obstacles to equaliberty and conditions the possible strategic lines of march for the achievement of equaliberty. To appreciate the importance for political theory of this shift of focus toward the laws of motion and institutional landscape of contemporary society, consider a remark by Judith Squires. She has pointed out that, before ‘concrete differences [can] be treated equally’, the ‘central issue [of] what criteria of evaluation are employed and who has the power to specify these’ must be confronted. The contemporary power of global capitalism to specify, namely to create a world in which the profit motive displaces all other criteria of evaluation, and so to effect a corporate takeover of democracy and a degradation of the planet’s ecosystems, is unprecedented in its extent and intensity. Overall social change will remain inconceivable, bourgeois right (abstract, individualistic right) will remain the absolute horizon of political theory and of political action, and the ground of social equality will never be occupied, unless social movements can challenge the power of capital ‘to specify’. The ‘proposition of equaliberty’ captures this strategic imperative but does so without reducing Marxist politics to a mere negative ‘anticapitalism’. By reformulating the politics of the rights of man in light of the principle of self-emancipation, Balibar seeks to establish the ‘immediately ethical signification’ of equaliberty.

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80 Balibar 1994a, pp. 47–8. One experimental hypothesis which has informed this paper, and which a Marxist political science could fruitfully pursue, is that equaliberty, self-emancipation, the needs principle, transitional politics and the democratic republic exist as a chain of necessary relations, each entailing the others and constituting a system of concepts defining democratic Marxist political theory.

81 Squires 2000, p. 130 (emphasis added).

82 Of course mere negative anticapitalism, mere Negrian ‘Being Against’, is never enough. Anti-democratic anticapitalisms – Stalinism in the twentieth century, the various ‘fundamentalisms’ in the twenty-first century – are reactionary alternatives to capitalism. ‘One No, Many Yeses’ is a poor slogan. ‘Two Nos’ is always the bare minimum required.

83 Balibar 1994a, p. 49.
Balibar has suggested that finding ‘concrete forms’ for a contemporary equalibertarian politics is the most difficult of tasks. ‘Answers’ can only emerge in intimate relation to the self-controlling struggle of the ‘part of no part’, the ‘irreducible ‘being there’ of the dominated. And the recent spread of global networks of oppositional organisation and communication does indicate that movements are connecting up across old boundaries (the World Social Forum, the European Social Forum, Peoples’ Global Action etc.) and are generalising from ‘single issues’ to a wider politics (‘another world is possible’, ‘todos somos Marcos’). The logic of capital accumulation sends the process of ‘real universality’ into hyperdrive and the ‘parts of no part’ are each brought under the impress of capital and its pathologies. Increasingly, oppositional politics simply cannot avoid mounting a challenge to capital’s ‘power to specify’.

To act on this new terrain, perhaps movements need a combination of Balibar’s analytical discourse to make sense of the ‘superimposition of layers of the political’ due to the co-existence of three epochs – ‘the ancient, the modern, and the postmodern’ are his terms – in ‘a disunified totality, in a noncontemporaneity that is the very structure of the “current moment”’, together with his more urgent political discourse concerned to ‘construct a practical conduct for ourselves on all these levels at once’. He wisely offers no easy answers but suggests we look for ‘guiding threads’ to work out how to do this. Perhaps one way to make progress will be to aim to develop theory for social movements, through intimate social and intellectual relations with the ‘authentic discourse of the dominated’, using the critical lens provided by the ‘proposition of equaliberty’. As Daniel Bensaïd has said, ‘the research programme inspired by Marx... only has a genuine future if, rather than seeking refuge in the academic fold, it succeeds in establishing an organic relationship with the revived practice of social movements – in particular with the resistance to imperialist globalization’.

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84 Balibar 1994a, p. 59.


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The worker’s antagonism to the machine has traveled a long way from the time when he simply wished to smash it. Now what he wants to have done with is his very work. He wants to do something entirely different – express all his natural and acquired powers in an activity worthy of him as a human being.

Raya Dunayevskaya, 1951

The traditional perception of the American working class as apolitical or even backward, since it has never built a labour party of its own or embraced Marxist parties in any significant way, has been challenged in recent decades by numerous writers who have highlighted the militancy and social consciousness that have been integral to the myriad experiences of the US labour movement. The period since World War II provides especially powerful testimony of this combative legacy. The wildcat strikes
in the coal, steel, and automobile industries in the 1950s, the formation of militant black caucuses in Northern and Southern unions in the 1960s, and the ‘blue-collar blues’ which defined much social discourse in the US in the 1970s all challenged the traditional view that this ‘working class without socialism’ was lacking in social consciousness and militancy. While much has been written on these and other labour struggles in the post-World-War-II era, the full history of the American labour movement’s contribution to what some have called ‘the struggle against work’ remains to be written. Though that cannot be attempted here, we will focus on one especially important moment in the battle over the nature of work – the coal miners’ strikes in West Virginia from 1949 to 1951, the first wildcat strikes against automation in US history. The reason for focusing on these strikes in this essay is that they help illuminate how revolutionary-Marxist currents which aim to comprehend and connect to spontaneous mass struggles are challenged by new forms of proletarian subjectivity.

I. Coal miners and the US labour movement in the 1940s

Coal miners have long been known as the ‘shock troops’ of the US labour movement. In the 1940s, their reputation was further enhanced when half-a-million went on strike in the midst of World War II in open defiance of the ‘no strike pledge’ supported by virtually every US labour leader. Remarkable as were the actions of the miners in 1943, it was by no means exceptional. Over two million US workers were involved in strikes in 1943. The middle and late 1940s marked one of the most militant periods in American labour history. As one participant in the labour movement at the time put it,

Labor unrest . . . was a great public concern in the US in the final months of the Second World War. All three major labor centers – the AFL, the CIO, and the railroad brotherhoods – participated in a record number of strikes.4

The number of strikes by US workers further increased with the end of World War II. In November 1945, the United Auto Workers (UAW) went on strike for 113 days against General Motors. By January 1946, industry-wide strikes had spread to the meatpacking, electrical, and steel industries. In February

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3 The phrase is from a letter of Anton Pannekoek to Cornelius Castoriadis of November 8, 1953. It is found in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 10901.
1946, the number of man-hours lost to strikes rose to 23,000,000, a historic record in the US.\textsuperscript{5} Coal miners were a central part of this ferment; they went out on strike again in 1946, obtaining a Health and Welfare Fund.

With the end of World War II, 12 million men and women in the armed forces and another eight million engaged in military production were about to flood the labour market. Fears mounted of a return to conditions of massive unemployment and economic depression that characterised the 1930s. US workers had not endured the indignities of warfare on the battlefield and declining wages and living conditions at home in order to passively accept a return to such conditions. Many US workers were determined to obtain their share of the ‘freedoms’ promised to others as an outcome of the war.

US capital responded in a variety of ways to the militancy of US labour. One was the passage of anti-labour legislation aimed at curbing union and strike activity (in 1947 alone, state legislatures enacted the largest number of anti-labour laws since the Haymarket riots of 1886).\textsuperscript{6} Congress also passed the notorious Taft-Hartley Act, which imposed severe fines and penalties on unions calling strikes that threaten a ‘national emergency’. Laws were also passed requiring every union to file an affidavit showing that no union official was associated with Communist Party. Yet such directly repressive measures were not the only form of capital’s response to labour militancy. Faced with incessant demands by workers for higher wages, capital sought to secure greater control over the production process. Considerable investments were made in mechanisation and labour-saving devices in order to boost productivity, even as workers obtained higher wages. One of the most striking expressions of this was the automobile industry’s response to the strikes carried out by the UAW in the years immediately following World War II. By 1948, the UAW won the first contract with a major industry which tied wages to cost of living increases. In exchange, the UAW included in its contract the famous Paragraph 8, which granted the company full control over production processes and procedures.

Most labour leaders were fully willing to go along with such an arrangement. A basic trade-off defined their perspective: in exchange for substantial wage increases, the union leadership acquiesced in the introduction of increased mechanisation and speed-up. Such an approach was not adopted without

\textsuperscript{5} Rayback 1968, p. 390.
\textsuperscript{6} Rayback 1968, p. 396.
considerable opposition from rank-and-file workers who did not wish to completely surrender control over production procedures. One Detroit autoworker wrote:

Eighteen or twenty of us worked on operation number sixty-eight, a job in building autos. We worked with one foreman we’d broken in. We ran the job as we saw fit and worked forty or forty-five minutes each hour. We’d get production ahead and then sit down to talk or rest or kid around. We never worked more than forty-five minutes of an hour, and sometimes, only thirty-five.

But, by the late 1940s, this changed:

[The foreman] called me into his office and said, ‘You’re to work as I say. You work on the hour, and don’t stop until I say so. Go out and tell the boys.’ He handed me the union rulebook. I said, ‘I’ve been in the plant for six years. There is nothing in the rulebook which says a worker has to tell another worker what to do. If you want them to know something you tell them yourself’.

It soon became clear, however, that the union leadership would no longer challenge such changes in production procedures because of its trade-off of wage increases for total management control of production.

UMWA leader John L. Lewis fully endorsed this approach of obtaining higher wages in exchange for granting management control over the process of production. As one study put it,

The union believed that modernization of the mines through mechanization would be crucial in saving the industry. The union imposed high wages on all operators, thus pressuring them to mechanize. It was the union’s philosophy that a number of mines too small to be mechanized should go out of business. In 1950, Fortune labelled Lewis ‘the best salesman the machinery industry ever had’.

The dynamics of capital accumulation in the US in the late 1940s confirmed Marx’s analysis of the overall trajectory of capitalist production. Capital initially confronts workers’ demands for higher wages by trying to repress

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7 Denby 1989, p. 124.
8 Takamiya 1978, p. 85. For more on Lewis’s attitudes toward mechanisation and automation, see Dubofsky and Van Tine 1977, pp. 476–501 especially.
and contain their struggles. When this proves impossible, capital responds by reorganising the production process through increased mechanisation so as to boost the productivity of labour, even as wage rates rise. The incessant drive toward automated production in US industry in the post-World-War-II era flowed from the militancy of US labour, not its passivity. These conditions set the stage for the coal miners’ strikes of 1949–51.

II. A new movement from practice

A series of strikes by coal miners in 1949 was precipitated by the expiration of the contract between the UMWA and the coal companies in June 1949. The conflict between the miners and the companies initially seemed to be over traditional issues. UMWA leader John L. Lewis was demanding a six-hour day and a five-day work week and a doubling from 20 cents to 40 cents of the royalty from each ton of union coal mined into the UMWA’s Health and Welfare fund, which helped pay for the miners’ health and pension benefits. An increase in wages and benefits was thus the main issue on the minds of UMWA leaders as they sparred with the coal operators for a new contract. When the contract expired on 30 June 1949, however, Lewis did not call the miners out on strike, as usually would have been the case, given the solid tradition of ‘No Contract, No Work’ in the UMWA. He instead declared that miners would work a three-day week until they received a serious offer from the operators. He also called a series of selective regional strikes to deplete the stockpiles of coal. Lewis was trying to manoeuvre around the recently-passed Taft-Hartley Act, which imposed severe fines and penalties on unions that call industry-wide strikes.

A new development had arisen several months before, however, which made subsequent events take some unexpected turns. On 6 May 1949, the first continuous miner was installed in Bethlehem Steel’s Carolina-Idamay mine in Marion Country, West Virginia. Though the word automation had not yet been coined, it marked its first introduction into US industry. The continuous miner had a dramatic and immediate effect when it was introduced into the mines. By automating the extraction process, the continuous miner required only one-third as many miners as before. And, by creating a continuous mechanised process of coal extraction, it heightened speed-up and greatly endangered the lives of those left on the job. Andy Phillips, a miner who participated in the strike, described this new development:
Under the traditional mining process, work crews followed each other, and by working harder to catch up, or when a machine broke down, had a chance to rest. And since a boss could be in only one place at a time, he could not watch all the miners all of the time. With the continuous miner all this changed. By stationing himself at the machine, the boss could watch everyone for the entire shift. And there was no catching up. They named the machine well when they called it the continuous miner, because it was truly designed to work without stopping.

But more than that were the conditions of work the new method created. With the head ripping into the face, the powerful whirling bits pulverizing the coal conveyed back and dumped into the waiting buggy, fine coal dust quickly saturated the air, making it impossible to see more than a few feet. Water sprinklers vainly tried to keep the dust down. But that was only part of it. Several running motors on the machine gave off so much heat that the work face became a hot, sweaty, dusty and confining black box. . . . The words are hard to find that can describe what this did to the work force. Here you have the continuous miner, ripping the coal out and spewing it back over the conveyer boom as it swung back and forth until the coal was piled from rib to rib and to the top, virtually entombing the work crew in a confined area where the dust and heat were multiplied many times over. With all the motors running and in an atmosphere super laden with fine coal dust, a single spark from anything – the grinding bit hitting a hard sulphur ball, a spark from any motor, a short in any electrical wire – could turn that face into a raging inferno of death-dealing destruction.\(^9\)

The introduction of the continuous miner thus heightened miners’ concerns over health and safety, as well as over working conditions as a whole. The situation became further inflamed in September 1949, when Lewis announced that the coal operators were refusing to make any more payments to the UMWA’s Health and Welfare Fund in response to his strategy of keeping the miners at work for three days a week. Almost immediately, workers in two of the largest mines in West Virginia called local union meetings and voted to strike until the payments were resumed. Their decision to strike was not authorised or supported by Lewis. Still, their decision led to a spontaneous regional walkout, as other miners decided to join the strike. In the next weeks, roving pickets shut down mines not only in West Virginia,

but throughout Appalachia. Within a month, over 400,000 coal miners had walked off their jobs.

The scope of this wildcat strike took Lewis by surprise, prompting him to demand, in early January 1950, that local union officials get the workers back to work. Instead of complying with this order, however, a meeting of 300 local officers voted to reject Lewis’s demand – the first time something like this had happened to the highly-regarded Lewis, who had almost a mythical stature among miners for his legendary work in leading the UMWA. As miners active in the strike at the time reported:

The [union] hall was jammed with rank-and-file miners vehemently opposed to going to work and eager to express their feelings. Unlike some local union meetings, such as my own where our local union bureaucrat had contacted members they knew were in favor of returning to work to be present and support the District representatives who attacked those of us who spoke up to stay out, the atmosphere in the hall raged with strike fever. ‘We’ve followed Lewis and the District too long already,’ one miner bellowed. ‘I’ve lost everything I got, just like a lot of you guys in this hall. But I’ll be damned and go to hell before I go back to work now, and I’m ready to send anyone else to hell who tries to go back before we get what we want!’ ‘We’ve been hangin’ by our thumbs for over six months now,’ another declared, ‘and we’re no closer to a settlement now than we were six months ago. Now it’s up to us. I know we can do it, you know we can do it, and we all know it’s gonna take all of us to do it if it’s gonna get done at all.’

A number of issues motivated miners to take such independent action. They were certainly furious at the coal operators’ refusal to make payments to the UMWA’s Health and Welfare Fund. This was no small issue, as the health of so many had been ruined by working in the mines; the Fund was in part established to rehabilitate the 50,000 former miners who were paraplegics. Such concerns dovetailed with miners’ concerns over the increase in accidents resulting from the introduction of the continuous miner, which they dubbed ‘the man killer’. The strike thereby touched directly on the nature of work itself, as miners asked questions like ‘what kind of labour should a man perform?’ in the face of increasingly dehumanised working conditions.

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10 These statements from miners involved in the strike are quoted in Phillips 1984, p. 20.
11 Goldstein 1990, p. 249.
12 See Denby 1960, pp. 27–46.
In February 1950, President Harry Truman declared a national emergency over the strike and imposed the drastic Taft-Hartley Act against Lewis and the UMWA. Among other things, this made it illegal for any part of the UMWA to extend strike support to the miners. Any miner who tried to convince another to stay out of work was now subject to contempt of court and heavy fines. This created a drastic situation, with many miners facing total destitution. However, the formation of a Miners’ Relief Committee – set up by a number of rank-and-file workers and radical activists in the West Virginia area – helped garner material aid from unionised workers in different parts of the country (especially in Detroit), which greatly helped to ameliorate matters.\footnote{See Preis 1964, p. 394: ‘A number of UAW locals adopted resolutions for a 24-hour national strike to back the miners. The major GM locals in Flint and others throughout the country voted financial aid to the miners and organized food and clothing collections for them. A city-wide Detroit labour caravan carried aid to the hard-pressed miners.’}

Faced with the near-total shutdown of coal production, on 3 March 1950, the coal operators caved in and signed a new contract with the UMWA. Workers received a 70-cent daily wage increase and a 10-cent per ton increase in contributions to the Health and Welfare Fund. Most importantly, for the first time the coal operators agreed to an industry-wide contract with the UMWA – something they had fiercely resisted for years. The National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1950 marked the beginning of a new era in collective bargaining in the coal industry.\footnote{See Perry 1984, p. 73.} Faced with such a massive strike, the operators agreed to Lewis’s demand for wage increases and an industry-wide contract, in exchange for a tacit understanding that the union would not contest the introduction of automated production measures like the continuous miner.

As a result, though it appeared that the coal miners had won a major victory with the outcome of the strike, they actually returned to work facing even more dangerous and life-threatening situations than before. As one miner active in the strikes of 1949 and 1950 stated not long after they concluded:

In the past, the UMWA leadership was able to mobilize the miners for battle and overcome all opposition because they were close to the men. But today, the UMWA leadership knows that a full mobilization of the miners means a threat to their own power. The result is the waging of half-hearted battles which lead to defeat. In the last big battle, the strike of ’49 and ’50, it was...
the action of the rank and file which showed Lewis the way. The men had no contract, were working a three day week and were tired of it all. They went out. Not because they loved the contract so much but because they wanted their own contract, which meant a change of life they were living. The men moved and Lewis had to go with them or be left behind. . . . Every time men at a mine [now] go on a wildcat, the district is right on the scene to get the men back to work. Always grievance procedure, no interruption of production. Lewis, at a banquet in Reading, Pa., last fall, said that men must do nothing which might increase the cost of production for the operators. Production is more important than the lives and welfare of the men in the mines.15

Within less than a decade, thanks in large part to the union leadership’s acceptance of the introduction of automated production in the mining industry, the number of miners in the US plummeted from over 500,000 to a little over 150,000.

III. The Marxist Left and the miners’ strike

Though the 1949–50 miners’ strike failed to redress the problem of the continuous miner, it represented an historically new development. It was one of the largest wildcat strikes in US history. It marked the first time that the miners had openly defied one of the most highly regarded union leaders in America. And the experience of the strike raised the question of what kind of labour should humanity perform as miners discussed the impact of the continuous miner on working conditions. A new social consciousness concerning the need to oppose the degradation of work had begun to emerge from a largely spontaneous labour struggle. This set the stage for subsequent wildcat strikes against automation, such as those which plagued the auto and steel industries throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The coal miners’ strikes of 1949–50 also shed light upon the response of American Marxists to the emergence of new struggles against automated production. The American radical movement did not have a major presence in the coal fields in 1949–50, though radical tendencies ranging from the Molly McGuires to the IWW to the Socialists and Communists had been active in miners’ struggles for many years. In 1949–50 the Trotskyist Socialist Workers’

15 Blizzard 1954, p. 4.
Party had an active, albeit numerically small, local in Morgantown, West Virginia which was directly involved in the strike. Its Morgantown branch largely consisted of members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency (JFT), the opposition tendency inside the SWP headed by C.L.R. James (a.k.a. J.R. Johnson) and Raya Dunayevskaya (a.k.a. Freddy Forest). JFT members played a significant role in the strike: several of its members worked in the mines, and they were instrumental in proposing and helping to set up the Miners’ Relief Committee which garnered material aid for the wildcat from various union locals around the country.

During the miners’ strike, however, the SWP leadership expressed reservations about the Morgantown branch’s involvement in the strike. Because of their strident criticism of bureaucracy and strong support for rank-and-file initiatives, JFT members tended to be viewed by SWP leaders as adventurists who were likely to get the party into trouble with the UMWA. The tensions were evident at a 26 February 1950 meeting of SWP trade-union activists held in Youngstown, Ohio. Harry Braverman, then a leading figure in the SWP, stated,

The world ‘revolt’ was not chosen by us, but by the press; it is an unfortunate word perhaps. . . . To attempt to generalize this into a ‘revolt’ [against the UMWA leadership] would be dangerous. . . . There is of course such a situation in any union between the men and the International but I think we would be overhasty if we tried to equate the Lewis bureaucracy with the others, say in the steel union. . . . Lewis has deep loyalty from the miners.

Braverman nevertheless congratulated the Morgantown members on their ‘fine job’ of organising the Miners’ Relief Committee, which ‘pushed the situation from a local question and made it into a national one’.16 George Novack, another SWP leader, was even more emphatic about the need not to be seen as opposing the UMWA leadership. In a letter to Dunayevskaya (who was living in Pittsburgh at the time and who had made several trips to Morgantown during the strike) Novack stated:

Lewis was under heavy pressure from the ranks and is likewise seeking support for [his] own bureaucratic interests. This is the positive element in [his] move which we have sought to bring forward and utilized for our

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progressive aims. . . . Unity and solidarity in struggle will have to be promoted by exerting pressure upon the union leaders rather than by direct connections established through the ranks of the rival union organization.17

None of the SWP leaders mentioned at the time that a prime motivation behind the walkout was concern over the introduction of the continuous miner.

It should come as no surprise that the Johnson-Forest Tendency welcomed the new phenomenon of wildcat strikes against automation. James and his colleagues had been promoting for years the idea of workers’ self-activity in the face of what they saw as the tendency towards bureaucratic state capitalism, as evidenced not alone in Stalinist Russia but world-wide. In their 1947 booklet *The Invading Socialist Society*, James and Dunayevskaya argued that the focus of workers’ struggles was undergoing a radical shift, in that the proletariat was ready, on a world scale, to revolt not just against the unequal distribution of surplus-value, but against value production itself.18 In the same year, the JFT published *The American Worker* (by Ria Stone), which chronicled the growing dissatisfaction of American workers with bureaucratic production and management methods. Moreover, in 1947, the JFT issued (in bulletin form) the first English-language edition of parts of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, especially the essay ‘Alienated Labour’. By the late 1940s, the JFT had become well-known in the American Trotskyist movement for its emphasis on ‘alienated labour’ and workers’ struggles against it. The emergence of a spontaneous wildcat strike centring not so much on the proceeds of labour, wages and benefits, as on the very nature of the labour process itself, seemed to be in line with their perspective.

Nevertheless, different attitudes within the group toward the coal miners’ strikes ultimately led to its break-up, although this did not become explicit until 1955. This can be discerned from the correspondence carried on between James and Dunayevskaya between 1949, when the strike began, and 1951, when the JFT broke from the SWP. The ramifications of this issue extend far beyond the debates carried out by a small circle of radicals fifty years ago, for it touches on the very relation of spontaneous workers’ struggles to the ‘historic right to exist’ of a Marxist tendency.

IV. A new movement from theory

During the period of the miners’ general strike, James, Dunayevskaya, and Grace Lee Boggs (the third main figure in the JFT) were engaged in an intense three-way philosophical correspondence. Their letters centred on Lenin’s commentary of 1914–15 on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* and the dialectical development of Marx’s *Capital*. Though some of this theoretical discussion preceded the 1949–50 strike, it was clearly affected by it. As Dunayevskaya put it at the height of the strike on 15 February 1950,

> Just as the 1945–46 general strike transformed the abstract Russian question on property forms into one of actual production relations, so at present the struggle of the miners and the new content they have infused into ‘No Contract, No Work’ is what gave me the impulse to go into the essential dialectical development of Marx himself.¹⁹

The concepts in Marx which took on special importance in the correspondence between James and his colleagues in this period concerned the despotic plan of capital and the form of freely associated labour. They strongly challenged the view, held by many Marxists of the Second and Third Internationals, that in *Capital* and elsewhere Marx contrasts the ‘anarchy of the market’ to the need for planned social production.²⁰ James and his colleagues focused instead on how capitalism is based on the separation of the labourers from the objective conditions of production by rendering the labourer ‘owner’ of nothing but her capacity to labour. Torn from the ‘natural workshop’ of the soil, labour suffers an internal fracturing between subject and object from the very birth of the capitalist production process. Capitalism’s aim is to bring labourers together for the sake of extracting surplus-value. Yet the new form of cooperation born from the capitalist production process rests upon a despotic plan – the despotic plan of capital. As Dunayevskaya put it in draft essay on form and plan sent to James and Boggs on 27 December 1950, ‘we then have the plan of the capitalist to bring the workers together for purposes of extracting unpaid labor: it is despotic in form and individual in content’.²¹

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²⁰ For a detailed discussion on how this perspective permeated much of the perspective of both the Second International and Stalinism, see Hudis 1998.

²¹ ‘Presentation on Form and Plan’ [27 December 1950], in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9250.
At first, this despotism seems to be due to the presence of machines in the labour process; the workers then seek to break them up. Later, it becomes clear that this despotism has a class basis, in the ownership of productive property by the capitalist class. As capitalism develops, however, the despotic form of capital runs deeper than even the personal domination of capitalist over the worker. It becomes integral to the very rhythm and nature of work itself. As the very activity of labour becomes ‘machine-like’, and hence alien to the labourer, the worker revolts not only against the personifications of capitalist production, but against the capital relation itself. As Dunayevskaya wrote in another manuscript sent to James in 1951,

The machine sweeps away the technical reasons for ‘the annexation of the worker to a detail function.’ But while this undermined the subjective authority of the capitalist, it encrusted the planned despotism with the objectivity of the machine which took over the disciplining of labor. . . . The fact therefore is that whether the capitalist is there ‘in person’ or not, or whether the technology ‘in itself’ needs the detail laborer or a man fit for a variety of functions, the worker is confronted with an already existing material condition of production. He can do nothing but subordinate himself to it, to this alien force. Management over social labor which in manufacture was ‘purely subjective’ is now ‘purely objective.’

Yet this does not quell what Marx called (in his Poverty of Philosophy)\textsuperscript{22} the workers’ quest for universality:

The abolition of the division of labor would mean its bursting out of the old value form and an entirely new mode of labor in an entirely new form appear. The immanence of this breaks down entirely the psychology of civil society and the worker balks at productivity of labor, as a capitalistic function of order, monotony, uniformity, intensity.\textsuperscript{23}

Dunayevskaya therefore argued:

Not a single step ahead can be taken out of the chaos and the plan, the privacy of monopoly and the community of state power, economic crises

\textsuperscript{22} See Marx 1976a, p. 190: ‘What characterizes the division of labour in the automatic workshop is that labour has there completely lost its specialized character. But the moment every special development stops, the need for universality, the tendency towards an integral development of the individual begins to be felt’.

\textsuperscript{23} ‘Cooperative Form of Labor vs. Abstract Labor’ [2 March 1951], in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9303–05.
and world wars . . . until that one thing, the mode of labor, is changed. Otherwise all the old crap reappears. And that is why Marx’s whole point, the logic of his entire work, was not ‘plan’ vs. ‘anarchy’ but the despotic plan of the capitalist vs. the association of free men. . . . An absolutely new form of labor would have to arise.24

If all of this is the thrust of Marx’s work, why then have many ‘Marxists’ insisted on posing ‘the anarchy of the market’ vs. ‘planned production’ as the pons asini of a radical critique of capitalism? Is it simply that they have not read Marx carefully enough?

I would suggest that the problem lies deeper, in the objective conditions of capitalist production, which, as Marx put it, produces ‘a transposition in consciousness’ that afflicts the nature of even radical critique.25 Capitalist production centres on the reduction of concrete labour to abstract labour through the medium of socially necessary labour time. Abstract labour is the substance of value, which shows itself in a social process of exchange. This exchange process is indeed anarchic and chaotic. When the value-form is viewed outside of production, from the vantage-point of the circulation process, capitalism necessarily appears based on anarchy and chaos instead of on the uniformity established through the despotic plan of capital.

So objective is this problem that even Marx had not clarified the matter to his satisfaction until he wrote Capital, Volume I. Marx’s Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859), Dunayevskaya noted, is his most ‘economic’ work in which the theoretical categories are connected to the production process only abstractly. In the Critique, ‘Value appears like a deduction your mind makes instead of a reduction to which your concrete labor has been subjected to’.26 The situation is very different in Volume I of Capital (1867), where Marx asks the basic question, ‘Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity?’27 He answers: ‘Clearly, from this form itself’. The peculiar social character of labour under capitalism, the reduction of concrete labour to one

24 Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9283.
25 Cf. Marx 1981, p. 136: ‘This inverted relationship necessarily gives rise, even in the simple relation of production itself, to a correspondingly inverted conception of the situation, a transposed consciousness, which is further developed by the transformations and modifications of the circulation process proper.’
26 Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9261.
27 Marx 1976b, p. 164.
abstract, undifferentiated mass – abstract labour – explains the ‘the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production’.

In a word, the very nature of value production conveys the (false) impression that a system based on a despotic plan has an anarchic content. Many critics of capitalism thus see the civil war between capitalism and worker not as it is in the labor process . . . [but] rather in the forms which it assumes on the surface, where surplus labor appears as surplus product and hence planlessness. They thereupon contrast the anarchy of the market to the order in the factory. And they present themselves as the conscious planners who can bring order also into ‘society,’ that is the market.

Many of these concepts were clearly developed with the experience of the miners’ general strike in mind. An explicit expression of this was the decision on the part of James, Dunayevskaya and Boggs to hold a theoretical discussion on Marx’s concept of form and plan with rank-and-file workers during the height of the strike. On 15 February 1950, Dunayevskaya gave a lengthy presentation on the development from Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* to *Capital*, arguing that what enabled Marx to grasp the perversity of the commodity-form is that he listened to workers’ revolts and brought a ‘presupposition’ of a concept of ‘freely associated labour’ to bear on his analysis of capitalism. A worker at the meeting said, ‘When you don’t have a notion of future, you just counterpose essence to form; is that what all this means?’ James, speaking in the discussion, stated that ‘We have split the concept of state property. . . . Our function is further to split the concept of the party.”

Much of the three-way discussion between James, Dunayevskaya and Boggs in 1949–50 also centred on Lenin’s 1914 Hegel Notebooks. At issue for them was not simply that Lenin delved into a serious study of Hegel at the outbreak of World War I, or even that he held that it was impossible to understand Marx’s *Capital* without comprehending the whole of Hegel’s *Logic*. What most drew their attention was that Lenin had spent so much time focusing on ‘The

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29 Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9251.
Doctrine of the Notion’, especially its final chapter on ‘The Absolute Idea’, where the concept of ‘the negation of the negation’ becomes pivotal. That, too, spoke to issues raised by Marx in such works as his *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, where he argued that the ‘communist’ negation of private property was merely a first negation; to reach genuine liberation, Marx argued, that negation must itself be negated through the creation of non-alienating relations at work and in man/woman relations.\(^{31}\)

As James wrote in a letter of May 1949,

> For [Lenin in 1914] the core of the dialectic is self-movement through opposition. Good. But that is the core of the dialectic for *him* in 1914. But for *us*, in our world, the core of the dialectic is the materialist interpretation of Hegel’s last chapters of the *Logic*, the complete interpenetration of subjective-objective, idealism and materialism.\(^{32}\)

In several letters to James, however, Dunayevskaya noted that she felt Lenin had gone further into Hegel’s ‘Doctrine of the Notion’ than James himself had in his 1948 study *Notes on Dialectics*, which consisted of an extensive discussion of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*.\(^ {33}\)

After the conclusion of the miners’ strike in 1950, the JFT concentrated on preparing for what would prove to be its participation in its final SWP Convention, by submitting the document, *State-Capitalism and World Revolution* (written mainly by James, with assistance from Dunayevskaya and Boggs). Several months afterward, the JFT left the SWP and formed a new organisation, Committees of Correspondence. The new group explicitly declared itself free of Trotskyism and proclaimed that it opposed the Leninist concept of the vanguard party.

Yet, it was just when the JFT achieved political independence that differences within the group concerning the relation between spontaneous workers’ struggles and a Marxist group began to show themselves. This reared its

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\(^{31}\) See Marx 1975, pp. 293–305 and pp. 326–46 especially. For a discussion of how Marx’s encounter with Hegel’s Absolutes impacted the development of his concept of revolution, see Hudis 2000.

\(^{32}\) Letter of C.L.R. James of 20 May 1949, in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 1613. *State-Capitalism and World Revolution*, on the other hand, posed the concept of ‘Contradiction’ in Hegel’s Doctrine of Essence as the crucial category while having little to say on the Doctrine of the Notion. See James 1986.

\(^{33}\) For Dunayevskaya’s letters to James on Lenin’s ‘Abstract of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*’ see Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 343–56. For a further discussion of these issues, see Anderson 1995 and Dunayevskaya 2003.
head when another miners’ strike erupted in West Virginia in 1951. The strike was over the demand for seniority rights. At first sight, it may seem that this had little or nothing to do with the continuous miner and automated production. But the opposite is the case. The continuous miner resulted in thousands of lay-offs, which gave new urgency to demands for seniority. As Raymond Inghram, a worker from Morgantown who was part of the JFT put it,

We didn’t know at that time that Appalachia would be formed into a depression area from [the lay-offs resulting from the continuous miner]. But people wanted the seniority system to have the right to get off this machine, not to get on it, because they were young people and it was a man-killer. And so the new strike broke out.\(^{34}\)

Dunayevskaya held that the strike offered a crucial opportunity for members of Committees of Correspondence to present their ideas to workers and involve them in their plans for issuing a new publication. James, however, sharply opposed the idea, hitting out against what he called ‘the proposal to send leaders down there to edit and to organize and generally to lead like SWP leaders’. He insisted,

Our membership and their friends is the only audience I have in mind for the paper. . . . If a mighty bubble broke out, 500,000 miners versus John L. Lewis and shook the coal fields, I would not budge an inch from our program. We could plunge in, spend our money, exhaust ourselves, publish, editorialize, and generally enjoy ourselves, and when it was all over where would we be? Nowhere.\(^ {35}\)

Dunayevskaya denied she was holding onto the vanguardist approach of the SWP; in her view, she was seeking to follow up on new relations which emerged between the miners and JFT members in 1949–50 itself.

It was not that James was less interested in spontaneous workers’ struggles than Dunayevskaya. On the contrary, as became clear from his subsequent work, James placed so much importance on spontaneous workers’ struggles that he contended, ‘The socialist society [already] exists. We have to record the facts of its existence’ in everyday workers’ struggles.\(^ {36}\) Yet this notion

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\(^{34}\) Quoted in Phillips 1984, p. 31.

\(^{35}\) Letter of C.L.R. James of 17 September 1951, in Dunayevskaya 1986, microfilm no. 9315. For a fuller elaboration of this perspective, see James 1980.

\(^{36}\) See James 1968, p. 106.
rested on a different reading of the nature of automation and of proletarian revolt from that developed by Dunayevskaya. As James argued in his 1957 work *Facing Reality*:

> Automation is that stage of technology under which capitalism for the first time will not create a need for more manpower regardless of the mass of products produced . . . with automation, capitalism is robbing the majority of the population of the only role they have been permitted.  

Yet despite its human cost, James viewed automation as an essentially *progressive* phenomenon. He wrote:

> No worker is against automation as such. He recognizes that automation creates the possibility of such a development of the productive forces that no one anywhere need ever live in want again.

James went even further, arguing that ‘automation creates the conditions for abolishing all previous distinctions between political and economic control’. Automated production, he argued, provides workers with the ‘ability to control only individual machines, but the whole process, method and tempo, by means of which machinery is to be developed and put into use’. The greater concentration and centralisation of capital involved in automation meant, he argued, that,

> [F]rom the very organization of production, the working class, especially in large and highly organized plants, holds its own and on the whole continuously captures positions from management and supervision.

On this basis, he insisted that ‘the automation of industry in the United States is creating the actual conditions for a Government of Workers Councils’. James thus argued that the production relations of modern capitalism will lead workers to assume control of society in quasi-automatic fashion, without the need for their struggles to be mediated by a ‘vanguard party’ or some Marxist organisation of another type.

By the early 1950s, Dunayevskaya also rejected the vanguard party, and she also emphasised the ways in which the contradictions of capitalist

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37 James 1968, p. 25.
39 James 1968, p. 27.
40 James 1968, p. 28.
41 James 1968, p. 29.
42 James 1968, p. 27.
production created new possibilities for a socialist transformation of society. But she did not hold that the rise of automation meant that workers would create a new society in quasi-automatic fashion. ‘It is not the means of production that create the new type of man,’ she wrote, ‘but the new type of man that will create the [new] means of production’. She was interested in automation not because it produced, *sui generis*, the basis of a non-capitalist society, but because, in revolting *against* automation, workers were raising new questions about the nature of work. But the fact that workers posed *questions* like ‘what kind of labour should humanity perform?’ did mean that their spontaneous struggles by themselves *answered* them. Marxist theoreticians and organisations were still needed, she argued, to make *explicit* what remains implicit in spontaneous struggles. Otherwise, the creation of a new society could not be assured.

James, in contrast, recoiled from this perspective, as he more and more argued that the mechanism of capitalist production led to spontaneous workers’ revolts whose very *form* expressed the content of a socialist society. His attitude toward the relation between capitalist production and workers’ revolts determined his increasingly spontaneist approach to matters of organisation. Though differing approaches to the question of organisation on the part of James and Dunayevskaya did not become explicit until the mid-1950s, they were foreshadowed by their disputes over how to respond to the miners’ strikes of 1951 especially. As James later put it in a letter to Martin Glaberman in discussing his break from Dunayevskaya in 1955:

> You see, the main point in this as in everything is not merely to say what you think is, or what you think ought to be done, but to represent it by your activity and the very way you approach it. That we have lost entirely in the years that preceded our downfall. *A lot of babbling about automation,* speculations as to the condition of the working class, a quite hopeless treatment of what should have been the very essence of our Marxist approach.

One biographer of James sees such disputes as central to the break-up of the Johnson-Forest Tendency. Farrukh Dhondy writes,

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43 See ‘Random Thoughts on the New Mode of Production’, in Dunayevskaya 1988, microfilm no. 12500. Though it lacks a specific date, the document was written at the times of the miners’ strikes in 1949–51.

Dunayevskaya, while having gone along with the theory… couldn’t see herself functioning without an organization even if it wasn’t called the Vanguard Party. She was of the opinion that if you were a revolutionary you had to do something; James’ increasingly rigorous point of view seemed to be in favor of doing nothing except observing what the people themselves did and describing its revolutionary potential. . . . What the conflict boiled down to was, what was the organization of revolutionaries to do?45

Dhondy has hit upon an important point. As James later stated, ‘The party formula has been exhausted, it can’t work any longer, something new has to take its place, what exactly we don’t know yet’.46 In fact, James never seems to have determined what the role of a grouping of Marxists who have broken with the concept of the vanguard party might be. It is not that he questioned the need for Marxist theory in general or his own role as a revolutionary in particular. But he never specified the relationship between spontaneous mass activity and revolutionary theory once the concept of the vanguard party has been jettisoned.47

As James wrote in 1963:

It is absolutely clear to me now that [the Marxist] is not so much concerned with educating the masses, the masses don’t need any education at all, absolutely none. The Marxist organization and the rest of them have to educate themselves.48

45 Dhondy, pp. 131–2. Dhondy’s book is nonetheless replete with factual errors regarding James’s sojourn in the US. He says James’s essay ‘Marxism and the Intellectuals’ is ‘a subtly stated attack on Dunayevskaya’s position’; it could not have been that, however, since the essay was written in 1962, seven years after James and Dunayevskaya had parted company. The essay is instead a response to Grace Lee Boggs’s break from James, in 1962. For a discussion of the reasons for the break between Boggs and James, see Boggs 2002. Dhondy also errs in claiming that the dispute between James and Dunayevskaya centred on James’s dismissal of Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind in his Notes on Dialectics. In fact, James did not discuss that work one way or the other in his Notes and neither did Dunayevskaya at the time (1948). Dunayevskaya first took issue with James for failing to explore Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind in her 1953 ‘Letters on Hegel’s Absolutes’. See Dunayevskaya 2002, pp. 6–8, 24–30.


Nevertheless, this did not stop James from holding to a rather traditional view of forms of organisation, as seen in his attack on Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin’s centralism: ‘She believed Lenin’s emphasis on centralism and the role of the party was reactionary. She was entirely wrong. . . . I believe that it is necessary for somebody to put forward a system, a centralized procedure.’ See James 1999, pp. 174, 177. For a more favourable view of Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin, see Dunayevskaya 1991.

But that only begs the question of what this Marxist organisation is supposed to do with the ‘education’ it has gained. Though James stressed the importance of both spontaneous self-activity and revolutionary theory, the relationship between the two was left undetermined.

Dunayevskaya was already headed in a different direction by 1951, in that she was reaching for a new relation between mass self-activity and revolutionary theory. The experience of the miners’ strikes, where workers asked such questions as what kind of labour should humanity perform, proved to her how erroneous was the claim that workers can attain only trade-union consciousness through their self-activity. But is Marxist theory only for the edification of intellectuals, or is it needed for workers to make sense of the meaning of their own actions so that they can develop its ramifications to its ultimate revolutionary conclusion? Is the role of a Marxist organisation limited to recording workers’ actions, or does it not also have something to contribute in the way of ideas – especially the idea of a totally new society?

These questions became the focus of a series of letters on Hegel’s Absolutes that Dunayevskaya sent James in May 1953. She wrote,

I am not concerned with spontaneity versus organization, nor with Stalinism which the workers will overcome. I am concerned only with the dialectic . . . of that type of grouping like ours, be it large or small, and its relationship to the mass.49

As she later put it, when looking back on these 1953 letters, which became the philosophical moment for her development of Marxist humanism,

I wasn’t interested either in the mass party, which the masses will build, or in the elitist party, which we definitely oppose, but in what happens to a small group ‘like us’ who know that nothing can be done without the masses, and are with them, but [such groups of] theoreticians always seem to be around too. So what is the objectivity which explains their presence, as the objectivity explains the spontaneous outburst of the masses? In a word, I was looking for the objectivity of subjectivity.50

James never responded to Dunayevskaya’s 1953 ‘Letters on Hegel’s Absolutes’. Nor did he ever return to a serious study of Hegel in the years following the

break-up of the Johnson-Forest Tendency in 1955, despite his earlier stated view (in Notes on Dialectics) that ‘We have to get hold of the Notion, of the Absolute Idea, before we can see this relation between organization and spontaneity in its concrete truth’.  

In founding News and Letters Committees in 1955, Dunayevskaya wrote:  

Although the leaders of the state capitalist tendency had been saying for years that we live in an age of absolutes, that the task of the theoreticians was the working out materialistically of Hegel’s last chapter on the Absolute Idea, we were unable to relate the daily struggles of the workers to this total conception. The maturity of our age, on the other hand, disclosed itself in the fact that, with automation, the workers began to question the very mode of labor. Thus they began to make concrete, and thereby extended, Marx’s profoundest conceptions… What was new was that there was a movement (a dialectic) not alone in the development from theory to practice, but from practice to theory.  

Meeting this movement from practice with a philosophy of revolution, she held, defined the ‘historic right to exist’ of a Marxist tendency.

V. Philosophy and organisation

Though a new conception of the relation of spontaneity to organisation and to philosophy opposed to the concept of the vanguard party began to emerge on the part of Dunayevskaya and others as a result of the experience of the miners’ strikes of 1949–51, its significance has for too long remained hidden from history. There are two basic reasons for this. One reason is that the discussions and debates in the JFT took place in a small organisation that did not directly impact the wider labour movement. Though a number of miners participated in the discussions initiated by the JFT in the 1950s, which in turn influenced a number of rank-and-file labour activists in ensuing years, Dunayevskaya and her colleagues did not exert any measurable influence on the politics of the UMWA or the miners’ struggle as a whole. The second

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51 See James 1980, p. 119.
53 See especially Martin 2001. Dunayevskaya’s effort to project the need for a new relation between philosophy and decentralised forms of organisation later obtained a larger hearing within the women’s liberation movement. For an important indication of this, see Rich 2001.
reason flows from the outcome of the strikes of 1949–51. As mentioned earlier, in exchange for ending the strike, the coal operators gave Lewis an industry-wide contract in the form of the National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1950. A long period of relative labour peace descended upon the coal industry, as Lewis and the operators worked out subsequent contracts through secret negotiations. Rank-and-file discontent continued to show itself, as seen in the 170 wildcat strikes that broke out in the coal fields in 1956 alone. Yet the sharp decline in the number of miners, the massive unemployment in the mining region, and the firm authoritarian control exerted by Lewis over the union enabled him to impose an era of relative harmony between the union leadership and management that lasted for two decades. As one study put it,

The industry, which had experienced strikes in contract negotiations on the average of once every 18 months in the previous 13 years, was not to experience a single such strike in the 13 years following 1951.

The outcome of the strikes of 1949–51 therefore appears to signal for some not a new stage of workers’ consciousness and subjectivity but rather one of accommodation between union and management. This helps explain why the miners’ strikes of 1949–51 have so rarely been taken up by radical historians and theorists, whether of the vanguardist or autonomist variety. The process becomes lost in the product. The inner strivings of workers battling automation becomes subsumed by the ‘harmony’ established between capital and the union leadership. Those who stay on the surface level of phenomena and fail to discern the dialectic that operates beneath the interplay between established interests, thus fail to even notice a key moment in the emergence of a new expression of proletarian subjectivity.

The reason it becomes so important to penetrate this false appearance today is that the questions that emerged in these first massive wildcat strikes against automated production reverberate with some of the central issues of our life and times. Over the past several decades, the focal point of innumerable forces of revolt has been the effort to challenge and transform the conditions of labour and human relations as a whole. As long as capitalism remains with us, there is no doubt that the battle to redress the inequities in the distribution of value will persist. But, in light of the failure of so much of the

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54 Denby 1960, p. 46.
55 Perry 1984, p. 188.
traditional labour and socialist movement to project a truly revolutionary alternative, the effort to raise deeper questions concerning the nature of work, the very existence of value production, and the alienated character of human relations as a whole have gained greater and greater urgency. In this sense, the struggles of American workers have been at the forefront of some of the crucial questions which face masses of people around the world today as they confront the dehumanised conditions of high-tech globalised capitalism.

This makes it even more essential that we not only recognise and record the history of these important labour struggles, but that we also work out what remains an unresolved problem in the history of post-Marx Marxism – the relationship between the Reason contained in spontaneous mass struggles and the role that can be played by a grouping of non-vanguardist revolutionaries who seek to build upon it as the path to a new society. James’s spontaneist position, as well as similar ones developed by such tendencies as Socialisme ou Barbarie in the 1950s and 1960s, remain influential today, largely because they seem to provide an alternative to elitist and hierarchical forms of revolutionary organisation. At the same time, the problems such tendencies have confronted in projecting a positive alternative to the vanguard party form of organisation by specifying the ‘historic reason to exist’ of a tendency of Marxist theoreticians that exists independently of spontaneous struggles makes it all the more important to rethink the history of the American labour movement as part of working out a new relation of theory and practice. As Dunayevskaya put it in 1959, a few years after her break with James:

> So rich are the traditions of America, so uninhibited are the American workers by the preconceived notions of leaders, including those from their

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56 The phrase ‘workers as reason’ originally derives from a comment made by Lenin in describing the formation of the soviets during the 1905 Russian Revolution: ‘The sense and reason of millions of downtrodden people is awakening, not only for reading books, but for action, for living human action, for historical creativeness’. See Lenin 1943, p. 261. Dunayevskaya often used the concept of ‘masses as reason’ to emphasise the consciousness and creativity found in spontaneous freedom struggles, in contrast to the instrumentalist rationality of bourgeois society.

57 James’s emphasis on spontaneity can be seen as having influenced a number of currents in autonomist Marxism, including Negri and Hardt. At the same time, in regard to the problem of organisation, they seem not to have gone beyond his stopping point, as seen from the conclusion of Empire: ‘The only event that we are still awaiting is the construction, or rather the insulation, of a powerful organization. . . . We do not have any models to offer for this event. Only the multitude through its practical experimentation will offer the models and determine when and how the possible becomes real’ [my emphasis]. See Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 411.
own labor ranks, that a new Humanism is evolving. They have no Labor Party to ‘lead’ them or mislead them – and they have no awe of intellectuals like the French Existentialists. That does not mean they reject theory. On the contrary. There is a movement from practice to theory that is literally begging for a movement from theory to practice to meet it. When these two finally do meet – and I have no doubt of their meeting – it cannot be anything short of a New Humanism.\footnote{58}

This was the core of the concept of Marxist humanism that she was to develop from the 1950s onward.

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James, C.L.R. 1999, Marxism for Our Times: C.L.R. James on Revolutionary Organization, edited by Martin Glaberman, Jackson: University of Mississippi Press.


Comrade Schlüter, the founder of our party archive, who under [Bismarck’s] law against the socialists fought in the front line, and who, for a number of years already, has been editing our party organ in New York, has in this work made a very valuable contribution to the history of the modern working-class movement, which he knows more intimately than most. With amazing diligence, and with an

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2 [Translator’s note: Hermann Schlüter (1851–1919) was a member of the editorial staff of the Sozialdemokrat in Zurich and London and organized the archives of the German Social-Democratic Party. In 1889 he was forced by Bismarck’s Anti-Socialist Laws to migrate to the United States. He became the editor of the main German organ of the Debsian Socialist Party, the New Yorker Volkszeitung. (On Schlüter’s early biography see pp. 21 to 29 of Paul Mayer, ‘Die Geschichte des sozialdemokratischen Parteiarchivs und das Schicksal des Marx-Engels-Nachlasses’, Archiv für Sozialgeschichte, Vols. VI/VII, (1966/67), pp. 5–198.) Schlüter was a frequent correspondent of Engels and an intimate friend of the leader of the First International in the US, Friedrich Sorge. In the chapter of his autobiography dealing with his exile in New York, Trotsky states: ‘In the German federation old Schlüter, the editor-in-chief of the Volkszeitung, and a comrade in arms of Hillquit’s, was more and more yielding his influence to the young editor Ludwig Lore, who shared our views.’ (Trotsky, My Life, Ch. 22, ‘New York’). The year before his death, we find him writing for the organ of the Socialist Party left wing, The Class Struggle, edited by the future leaders of early American Communism (Hermann Schlüter, ‘Marx and the International,’ The Class Struggle, Vol. 2, No. 3, (May–June 1918), pp. 271–88). Schlüter retained his post as editor of the Volkszeitung until his
even more amazing good fortune, he has been able to gather the literary remains of the German working-class movement in the United States, and especially in New York, up to the Civil War, and in that way has been able to preserve a wealth of primary sources that, without his painstaking care, would otherwise have been lost forever.

That would have been all the more regrettable because, as Schlüter rightly puts it, it is doubtful whether there is another city in the world offering such a classical context for the observation of the different stages that the proletarian struggle for emancipation had to go through as the city of New York. It is like the physicist, who looks at the natural phenomena where they appear in their most precise form and untouched by disturbing influences. Those disturbing influences have incessantly stood in the way of the normal development of the modern working-class movement in Germany. Thus, for instance, during the 1850s, the weight of reaction deprived the proletariat even of the memory of its independent movement; during the 1860s and 1870s, the bourgeois struggles for freedom tore apart the young working-class party for more than a decade; during the 1880s, the law against the socialists forced the irresistibly growing stream into a underground course; and right to the present, a very significant part of the forces of the proletariat has to be employed in fighting for demands that the bourgeois classes should have accomplished a long time ago, but which they have ignominiously betrayed.

That does not mean, of course, that due to the great complexities of its homeland, the German working-class movement has been less significant or instructive. On the contrary! But for that reason it is no less interesting to see how it has developed in a place where it is completely free from those obstructing influences, such as the United States, and especially New York. That is why Schlüter has no reason to apologise for having ‘overloaded’ his work with material. Rather, the articles, programmes, proclamations, etc. which he reproduces in his work, though perhaps not exciting reading in the superficial sense of the word, are absolutely necessary in order to offer a thorough picture of the German working-class movement in the American metropolis, and extremely interesting for those who do not look in such books for idle amusement, but for real instruction – especially since Schlüter, who is one of the most knowledgeable Marxists, always remains the master of his subject matter.

Moreover, his work by no means lacks chapters able to arouse the literary interest of the readers, as well as the scientific interest of the researcher. We are referring above all to the sections on Hermann Kriege, Wilhelm Weitling and Josef Weydemeyer. Kriege and his Volkstribun [People’s Tribune] appear in Schlüter’s work in the same unfavourable light as in the well-known circular which Marx and Engels addressed from Brussels against Kriege’s enervating propaganda. The Volkstribun was the first German working-class newspaper in New York, if not in the whole of the United States. Shortly before it had already appeared in Philadelphia, the Adoptivbürger [Adoptive Citizen], edited by G. Dietz, only to disappear shortly afterwards, in January 1848. The same month and year saw the appearance of the Volkstribun with the slogan: ‘Up with Labour! Down with Capital! [Die Arbeit hoch! Nieder mit dem Kapital!]’ and with the picture of Masaniello, the Neapolitan people’s tribune, as head-piece.

The Volkstribun was a weekly newspaper. It lasted for only one year, during which it underwent several metamorphoses. Kriege sent a series of letters to a number of rich bourgeois begging for money, which he signed ‘A Fool’, ‘An Unknown Person’, and sometimes also with his own name, in order to raise a few dollars for his newspaper. Schlüter reproduces one of those letters, which tends to confirm the suspicion that Kriege had already fallen victim to the insanity to which he succumbed a few years later. His articles in the Volkstribun were no less insane that those letters, and fully justify the steps taken against him by the communists in Brussels. Kriege answered the
[excommunicative] ‘papal bull’ with the usual empty talk, i.e. that he wanted ‘to help humanity make a real step forward’, whereas his critics wanted ‘to do’ nothing. His ‘purely positive work’, however, turned out to consist in throwing himself into the arms of Tammany Hall, the most corrupt political clique of New York, and preach the most bloodthirsty war propaganda about the conflict over the Oregon Territory raging at that time between England and the United States.

Weitling’s disavowal by the European communists set him in a bad light, but he belongs to a completely different category from Krieger. Schlüter offers much new material about him, and not only regarding his activities in America. Thus, for instance, he shows that Weitling was the son of a French officer, who perished in the Russian campaign of 1812. Weitling conducted what for that time was very significant working-class agitation in the United States, even if, unfortunately, it did not have the original freshness and strength of his Swiss agitational work. Since his break with Marx, Weitling had lost his sense of orientation, and he seems to have felt it, to judge from the truly unnatural hate he entertained for Marx, which he allowed to burst into the wildest calumnies. Weitling was opposed both to the trade-unionist and the political organisation of the workers; he placed all his hopes in utopian plans, such as the creation of banks of industrial exchange and communist colonies.

Nevertheless, he succeeded in building a workers’ organisation and to convene the first German-American workers’ congress, which met in 1850 in Philadelphia, as well as in founding an organ of the organisation called Republik der Arbeiter [Workers’ Republic], which, however, lasted for only one year. From January 1850 to April 1851, the Workers’ Republic appeared as a weekly. It ceased publication in July 1855, whereupon Weitling, after the inevitable disappointments, retired from the working-class movement. Through Democratic influences, has received a post in Castle Garden, then immigration bureau of New York, as a registrar of the German immigrants. He lost that post at the beginning of the Civil War, partly out of disgust with the vexations to which he was subjected as a Democrat (he did not have the slightest interest in the abolition of Negro slavery) by the Republican administration, and partly voluntarily, as he could not accede to the demand to persuade the young immigrants coming to his office to take part in the War. He devoted himself to inventions, in which he employed his genial talents. He built a machine to make buttonholes, which was at the same time an embroidery machine, but was cheated of the profits of his work by the large sewing-
machine firm Singer & Co. He died on 25 January 1871, three days after having attended an anniversary celebration of the New York sections of the International. In spite of all his faults and failures, Weitling left behind him, during his American as well as during his European period, a personally very sympathetic impression, to which Schlüter gives eloquent expression. Only his absurd invectives against Marx set his character in a very bad light.

The beginnings of the German working-class movement found their most prominent representative in Josef Weydemeyer, the friend of Marx and Engels, about whom some documentary material has been reproduced in the previous issues of this magazine [Die Neue Zeit]. Next to him should be mentioned Adolf Cluss, though the latter was a much inferior figure. Both worked together on the Reform, which began to appear from 5 March 1853, first as a weekly, then twice a week, then from the autumn of that year as a daily. However, it only managed to survive for little more than a year, but as long as it was a weekly, it can, as Schlüter states, proudly bear comparison with its successors as a revolutionary working-class periodical. Its real editor was a certain G. Kellner, an old fighter from the 1848 revolution, who lacked clarity on the main questions of the working-class movement. He tried to make the paper acceptable to the German bourgeoisie in New York, but they did not forgive its original standpoint, and let it fold. Weydemeyer then continued to put out pamphlets, even when the crisis crippled the working-class movement and the slavery question began to overshadow it. According to a well-known dictum of Marx’s, a healthy working-class movement in America was unthinkable before the abolition of slavery, and that was also Weydemeyer’s opinion, who, first with the pen and then with the sword, waged a passionate and glorious fight against the slave barons.

Schlüter deals in a thorough fashion with these issues, in a special chapter on Negro slavery and the working-class movement, which is one of the most instructive in the whole book. With the outbreak of the great Civil War ends therefore this period, which for the present he has chosen to describe, and we close with the wish, that he will be able to find enough leisure time to describe the later stages of the German-American working-class movement in the same captivating manner.

Translated by Daniel Gaido
Franz Mehring

Obituary of Friedrich Sorge

A few weeks ago, we first wrote about the precious gift that our contributor and comrade, Friedrich Adolph Sorge, had given to the international working-class movement with the publication of his correspondence with Marx and Engels, and today we must already write the obituary of the loyal man.

The ‘loyal man’, because loyalty was his innermost essence. Inseparably united to this loyalty was an incorruptible sincerity. Just as the first contact between Marx and Engels was unfriendly, so was the first contact between Marx and Sorge. Even during his last weeks, Sorge remembered a sharp judgement which Marx, in a letter to another American comrade, had made of him. When he sent us that letter together with others, he added: ‘Publish all that seems valuable to you, but what Marx wrote about me should not be suppressed. I wouldn’t like that.’ He never for a moment allowed himself to be suspected of being

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motivated by petty vanity, though he knew that Marx, through a friendship of many years, had overcome his initial mistake.

Thus was Sorge in everything: loyal and sincere, and of an inflexible rectitude. But he was completely free from what so often goes together with inflexibility: narrowness. The son of a German vicar’s family, he knew none of the usual prejudices which, for instance, confused the judgement of the vicar’s son Albert Lange, for all his often excellent qualities. Sorge’s father was a free-thinking parson, one of those Saxon ‘friends of the Enlightenment’ who played a most respectable role in the liberalism of the days before May [1848]. The house of Sorge’s father was a station on the underground railroad that led from France and Belgium to Poland. Polish revolutionaries frequently spent the night there, from where they were transported five or six miles further to the next station. That was the time at which Robert Blum, young Sorge’s first revolutionary hero, in the silent night filed the key which, during the Polish insurrection, would open the gates of Krakow’s citadel.

Sorge’s home was blessed with the proverbial abundance of children of the Protestant parson. For that reason, the father educated his numerous children himself, giving them a considerable grounding in the classical languages, history and literature. He bequeathed to the young Sorge those teaching abilities that would later enable him to survive the miseries of exile. He was no longer in his father’s house when Robert Blum was being murdered in Vienna and the counterrevolution triumphed in Berlin. He set out to Switzerland, whence he was recalled to his fatherland by the news of the uprising in Baden. He took part in the armed insurrection and fought together with Ubstadt. Sentenced to death in his home country, he was compelled to flee to Genf and Lüttich, and was finally forced by police harassment to cross the ocean.

The United States became his second homeland. At first, he regarded the country with antipathy, because of slavery in the Southern states and the infamous runaway slaves’ laws. His original intention was to migrate to Australia, and it was only by chance that he boarded the ship that took him to America. But, in that way, he reached the land that enabled him to carry out a historically significant activity. True, at first, he had to dedicate all his forces to the crude struggle for survival. It made a strange impression when the German Kaiser and the President of the Union exchanged, a few days ago, sonorous words about the blessed influence of German immigrants on the historical development of the United States. But it should not be forgotten
that those bearers of culture were thrown out of their country by violence and hunger, and were received as importunate beggars. As Sorge did not like to make any fuss about his person, he did not speak about the time of want. Only once did he mention it. When we reached the magnificent view from the banks of the battery over the New York harbour, he remarked dryly: ‘Yes, on those banks I spent many hungry and freezing nights’.

But the miseries of exile cannot have lasted long. As a teacher of music and singing, Sorge secured for himself a comfortable existence, and a few years after his arrival to America he married a young German woman, with whom he shared more than fifty years of the happiest marriage until his death. His household life was certainly not spared bitter suffering, due to the loss of children in the prime of their life. When he began to take part in public life, he became the most successful pioneer of the [First] International in America and, towards the end, its last standard-bearer. From his correspondence with Marx and Engels, which deals in a detailed fashion with the splits, we can see that, towards the end of the International, he was united to them by the deepest bonds of friendship and intellectual communion.

Sorge spent the last years of his life in quiet contemplation, living on the rich treasures of his memories and enjoying the loyal friendship of his comrades, especially Julie Romm and Hermann Schlüter. They were in the habit of visiting him alternately every Sunday at his quiet home in West Hoboken, where he finally retired. Those visits were always a great joy to him; he was particularly fond of comrade Romm. He also maintained a close relationship with the children of his friend Joseph Dietzgen, who he treated like his own children.

But his foremost interest always continued to be the fate of the working-class movement, and especially of its German branch. When we visited him last summer, he received us with truly touching hospitality. We spent unforgivable hours in his modest house, where Marx and Engels greeted us from the walls of the library and Beethoven and Wagner from the music room. He had been all his life a jolly drinker, and when, as a farewell, we drank a last bottle of wine, which he had received as a present for his golden wedding celebration, he drank to an early reunion.

Like all people who can look back on a fulfilling lifetime, he was fond of life and did not think about death. But because he had a bad winter behind him and was approaching his eightieth birthday, comrade Room, his medical adviser, feared for the coming winter. For that reason, his German friends,
to whom he had entrusted the honourable task of publishing the manuscript of his correspondence, edited by himself, made haste to bring it out as quickly as possible. But death proved to be faster than them, and Sorge did not live to see the finished book.

But his name will live on in that book as in the history of the International, as well as in his precious contributions to Die Neue Zeit, which mourns him as one of its most loyal friends, readers and contributors.³

*Translated by Daniel Gaido*

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Christopher Phelps

**Why Wouldn’t Sidney Hook Permit the Republication of His Best Book?**

The reissue of Sidney Hook’s *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx: A Revolutionary Interpretation* is nothing short of a publishing event.¹ Since its original publication by the John Day Company in 1933, the book has been virtually unobtainable, a rare find in second-hand stores, a subterranean classic. In the 1970s, one small socialist group created a bootleg edition for study circles – photocopied and bound between red covers, naturally. For seventy years, however, availability to the general reading public was limited because the book’s author prevented its republication.

Sidney Hook (1902–89) was a disputatious philosopher whose life spanned from the age of Eugene V. Debs, when Hook first adopted socialism while in high school, to the era of Ronald Reagan, during which Hook spent his last years as a fellow

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¹ This is a modification of a talk given at the American Philosophical Association’s Eastern Division in Philadelphia on December 28, 2002, at a session sponsored by the Society for the Philosophical Study of Marxism on ‘The Significance and Relevance of Sidney Hook’s *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*’. The new edition of *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* is edited by Ernest Benjamin Hook and includes a historical introduction by Christopher Phelps and supplementary materials by Paul Berman and Lewis S. Feuer.
at the conservative Hoover Institution in California. Along the way, Hook was a sympathiser of the Communist movement in its formative period of the 1920s. In 1933, he turned toward the anti-Stalinist Marxist Left, first as a leading intellectual in the American Workers’ Party headed by A.J. Muste and subsequently as a fairly loose sympathiser of the Trotskyists (with whom the Musteites fused). The Moscow Trials of 1936–8 sent Hook rightward to hard-line liberal anti-Communism, which he espoused and developed well before the Cold War, when he became notorious as an anti-Communist writer for *The New York Times* and other prominent outlets.

Despite Hook’s later wish that his 1933 account of Marx’s philosophy never reappear, not even after his death, his son Ernest Benjamin Hook and publisher Paul Kurtz at Prometheus Books recognised that *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* is a keystone of American intellectual history that deserves to be in print. At last, with this new edition, readers of every persuasion may easily obtain *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* and judge for themselves its significance and meaning.

The question I pose of why Hook refused to republish his best book is admittedly an exercise in conjecture. It is neither a philosophical nor an historical question. Hook left no clear declaration of his reasoning for refusing republication of the work, and no one can really apprehend the workings of a mind no longer here to explain itself. But exploring the question allows a useful entryway toward an understanding of *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*.

I.

Let me begin with four possible reasons I take to be inadequate, before proceeding to what I believe to be the actual reason Hook refused to permit republication of the first and best of his various books on Marx.

One possible reason is embarrassment over the book’s intellectual quality. Philosophers, like historians, tend to become more refined and ambitious with time, and to regret early works that look, in hindsight, foolish, or immature. This is not the case with *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*. The book was and is an unqualified success. In the popular press, *The New York Evening Post* called Hook ‘a courageous pioneer’, and the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* declared Hook ‘not only one of the very few bona fide academicians in America who knows anything about Marx, but . . . one of a
still smaller company who dares write about the founder of socialism’. Harold Laski called *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* ‘the most stimulating introduction so far written in English. . . . It marks an epoch in the study of its subject’, Reinhold Niebuhr hailed Hook as ‘the ablest interpreter of Marxian philosophy in our nation’, and Edmund Wilson, himself at work on the history of socialist thought that would become *To the Finland Station*, wrote, ‘If anybody wants a lucid guide to what Marx and Engels really thought as distinguished from what the various Marxist parties think they ought to have thought, Sidney Hook is the man for him to read’. In a forgivable moment of immodesty, Hook himself wrote to one correspondent in 1976, ‘It is not only the best introduction ever written about Marx’s thought but the best exposition. Far from wanting to forget it, I am proud to have written it’. Surely, shame over its intellectual form cannot be given as the cause of Hook’s refusal to reissue the book.

Secondly, was Hook concerned that the book conveyed a misconception of capitalism? This was one of Hook’s own late-life explanations for his ambivalence about the text. He twice noted in his autobiography that the book was published during the week of the bank holiday in 1933. It is certainly true that capitalism’s great disaster, with unemployment and bank failures at an all-time high and markets in ruins worldwide, accounted for the tremendous interest in the book in 1933, and it is also true that depression gave way to boom in the 1940s and 1950s. But nothing important in the book’s *argument*, none of its claims about Marx, hinge on a specific estimation of capitalism – certainly not the notion that capitalism lacked long-term viability. In fact, while finding capitalism prone to periodic crisis, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* rejected the theory espoused by some Marxists that a ‘breakdown’ of capitalism would automatically bring about communism.

Third, was Hook discomfited by the book’s position on Stalin’s Soviet Union? Hook sometimes explained his dissatisfaction with the book in such terms, and here a stronger case can be made. Because the book was written in the early 1930s, during Hook’s period of close collaboration with the Communist Party, whose ticket he endorsed in 1932, its judgements were far

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2 Full citations for these and other contemporaneous reactions may be found in Phelps 2002, pp. 39–40.
3 Hook 2002, p. 15.
softer on the Soviet Union than Hook later would be, even within a year. In 1932–3, Hook still tended to see the Soviet Union as a proletarian state—not yet a full-scale socialist democracy, but on the way toward it. In his autobiography, Hook observed that in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* he had deliberately refrained ‘from criticizing certain unhealthy developments in the Soviet Union’. That may be so. However, the book made very few judgements at all about Stalin’s Soviet Union. One exception was a passage praising ‘the progressive elimination of national, cultural, and racial hostilities among its heterogeneous peoples’. Dubious at the time, the phrase certainly does not stand up against recent events, when popular nationalism, far from eradicated, resurfaced the instant the former Soviet Union disintegrated, from the Baltic to Chechnya. That wishful phrase was anomalous, however, and a few missteps cannot explain the refusal to see republished a book that after all was about Marx, not the Soviet Union. A brief preface would have sufficed to clarify such matters.

Finally, was Hook reluctant to see the book back in print because it was Leninist? This is the most plausible reason of these four. Hook never said as much, but certainly the book treated Lenin differently than Hook later would, and it appeared during his phase of greatest sympathy for the 1917 October Revolution. Lenin, in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, was not the authoritarian, manipulative, despotic, totalitarian menace he would later be in Hook’s writings but rather a tribune of emancipation and liberation. However, the book was far from Leninist to the hilt. *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* contains a fundamental criticism of Lenin’s epistemology in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (which Hook had helped translate for International Publishers in the late 1920s). Hook faulted Lenin for a copybook epistemology that he found at odds with Lenin’s tactical and strategic thought. To define materialism as reality imparting itself upon consciousness, Hook held, was to deny the anticipatory and creative elements in the act of thinking. For a Marxist philosopher to challenge Lenin in this way in 1933 marked the book as slightly heretical and not strictly Leninist, though it might be construed as Leninist in other regards, given the book’s great admiration for Lenin as revolutionary organiser and refuter of revisionism. It is most accurate to view

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Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx as a synthesis of several strands of revolutionary inspiration. The German revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, along with Lenin, stand in the work as exemplars of socialist activism. The Central European philosophers Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács, both acknowledged in Hook’s preface, serve as theoretical forerunners of non-doctrinaire Marxism. Each of these heterogeneous influences is at play, with none of them drawn upon in pure or unalloyed form.

II.

The real reason Hook never allowed Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx back in print does not hinge on any of the text’s specific judgements but upon its entire point. The book was not only an interpretation of Marx but an examination of the entire socialist tradition. Its position constitutes a political and philosophical challenge to Hook’s later political theory – especially as regards methods of change, the character of the state, and ultimate aims – from a revolutionary point of view.

Hook’s political worldview remained fairly constant after the Second World War: Cold-War liberalism, centre-leftism, right-wing social democracy, or moderate reformism combined with fierce anti-radicalism. The specific words used are not as important as apprehending the basic outlook – an instinctually conservative variety of liberalism. This was precisely the outlook Hook was refuting systematically in Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx, beginning with the subtitle, A Revolutionary Interpretation. In 1933, Hook held that Marx’s essential purpose was his revolutionary opposition to capitalism and class society. He inveighed directly against attempts by social-democratic theorists such as Karl Kautsky, Edward Bernstein, and Rudolf Hilferding to lay claim to Marx as an advocate of gradualism and fatalism. In the opening lines of his book, Hook faulted such thinkers for ‘abandonment of the revolutionary standpoint which was central to Marx’s life and thought’. Since Hook himself later abandoned that very standpoint, it is no wonder that, for him, Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx was a source of insecurity, best forgotten.

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III.

The guiding thread of Hook’s 1933 book is Marx’s espousal of revolutionary socialism, namely the class movement toward a radical, thoroughgoing social equality. Marxism, *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* argued, is ‘a theory of social revolution’, and Marxism is first and foremost a revolutionary method of action, or *practice*, not ‘an armchair philosophy of introspection’.  

Hook’s emphasis on action was a direct challenge not only to scholarly stuffiness but to dogmatism, rigidity, and schematic constructions in Marxist theory. The rejection pile included construals of Marxism as an infallible science, as economic determinism (to Hook, the mode of production was significant, not all-determining), and as demonstration of socialism’s inexorability. In short, the work was a rebuttal of positivistic conceptions of historical materialism holding Marxism to be important first and foremost as a way of reading social reality, a science of social development. Instead, Hook argued, Marxism was a method independent of its specific conclusions about the development of society. The crux of the method was not that it provided an Olympian historical vista of society and history. At its core was its active, partisan *class allegiance*.

This is what accounts for the book’s emulation of Lenin and Luxemburg. *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* is a sustained defence of the revolutionary socialist tradition against social-democratic reformism. The political difference between revolutionary socialism and social democracy is not, as is commonly misunderstood, that between reform and revolution or between democracy and dictatorship. Rather, it is a difference over the *method* of pursuing social reforms, the *types* of reforms to be pursued, the *kind* of democracy envisioned, and the *strategy* for obtaining democracy. The revolutionary approach, Hook argued, demanded a commitment to the aim of a classless society, which he considered a prerequisite to human emancipation and democracy, and the organisation of social revolution by means of conscious exertion of working-class interests from below – that is to say, class struggle.

Hook shared with liberalism the values of free enquiry, free expression, and individual personality, but he jostled with political liberalism because he thought it utopian to expect universal values to be realised within a deeply class-divided society. *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* repeatedly emphasises the class character of the state. Even a representative republic,

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when organised around the principles of private property, Hook held, paraphrasing Marx, has a class character in that it ultimately and primarily serves the interests of the property-owning class; real democracy will only come about through a decisive social transformation altering the relations of production. The aim must be sweeping: the abolition of classes, and with them, of the state.

On this basis, Hook faulted the efficacy of gradualism, despite its claims of practicality. Pursuit of reforms was, of course, desirable, but reformism, gradualism, as a strategy was inadequate. Ultimately, he held, social movements will fall short of socialism and fail even to win and defend reforms successfully if confined to the horizons of conventional politics, namely politics as ‘an annex to business’. The failed German revolution after the First World War and the rise of a powerful fascist movement in Central Europe had given Hook a cautionary awareness of the potential for betrayal in reformism. He understood that excessive legalism can end in bloodbaths at the hands of reaction as surely as revolutionary fervour may cause needless deaths. In this sense, Hook’s revolutionary outlook was a corrective both to the parliamentarism of moderate socialism and to the political liberalism of Anglo-American political philosophy.

No wonder his early writings caused Hook later anxiety. The entire direction of political criticism in Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx was at odds with the later Hook, who saw in the West ‘democracy’ and ‘free enterprise’, not bourgeois society, and who identified a mixed economy with progress, precisely the obfuscation of the capitalist state and society that he considered self-defeating in 1933.

Given our own political universe, dominated as it is by conservatism, all of this may seem a bit otherworldly, and to indicate a young Hook in the grips of old dogmas. The virtual collapse of reformist liberalism over the past forty years, however, in many ways confirms Hook’s analysis. Furthermore, the defining quality of Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx was to combine revolutionary socialist ardour with intellectual heterodoxy. Hook’s emphasis on praxis, the active side of Marxism, was indebted to Korsch and Lukács, who were under Comintern suspicion at the time, and the text bore obvious

11 For a fuller analysis connecting the spinelessness of contemporary liberalism to the absence of a radical Left, see Jacoby 1999.
overlays of philosophical pragmatism. ‘There is nothing a priori in Marx’s philosophy’, wrote Hook in a display of his resistance to the doctrinaire and dogmatic; ‘it is naturalistic, historical, and empirical throughout’.  

Although John Dewey’s name was never mentioned in the text, there was a Deweyan cast to Hook’s Marx, as noted by many observers in 1933 and since. *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* recommends an experimental intellectual method, with knowledge considered hypothetical, fallible, and provisional, ideas held true only insofar as verifiable in experience or practice, and knowledge created and obtained, not solely *received* as sense-impression. Hook learned this approach from Dewey, his teacher and the most important American philosopher of the twentieth century, but he did not need to impart it to Marx, as some charged. Rather, steeped in philosophical pragmatism, he was able to find it where it lay, for example, in the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ where Marx emphasised practice as the rub of truth. To Hook, historical materialism *was* experimental naturalism.

In retrospect, one cannot help but see in Hook’s persistent criticism of ‘orthodoxy’ – held by him to be a religious impulse at odds with Marx’s disposition – a resistance not only to social-democratic positivism but to the emergent system of dialectical materialism taught mechanically in Stalinist textbooks. The Communist Party leadership, which sanctioned severe and inaccurate attacks on Hook’s philosophy in anticipation of publication of *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*, was not wrong in seeing in Hook’s thought a deviation. Their philosophical rigidity was an implicit target of Hook’s line of reasoning when he reminded readers that Marxism did best when emphasising ‘revolutionary flexibility in theory and practice’ rather than ‘a set of petrified dogmas’.  

He would later make this opposition more explicit in his revolutionary anti-Stalinist writings of the mid-1930s, when he criticised the Communist Party from the Left (as distinct from his later attacks on it from the Right).

Hook’s specific objects of philosophical criticism (inevitability and fatalism, sensationalism and mechanical empiricism, mechanistic and vulgar Marxism) are now largely dead issues, but his method, emphasising admission of fallibility and celebration of experimentation, remain useful in politics and social engagement, enhancing the likelihood of intelligent action and moral wisdom.

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To avoid, however, the temptation that arises at precisely this point to tame the text, we should return once again to the way that the experimentalism of *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* went hand-in-hand with revolutionary politics. This is to say that Hook’s heresy was a radical heresy. He had, though it might seem counterintuitive today, pragmatist grounds for his radicalism. The mode of society that would best permit the widest use of free and critical intelligence, he maintained, was socialism. Class society, capitalist society, blocked genuine community of inquiry. It stunted social experimentation, because ruling classes would block any proposal that made inroads on their prerogatives of property and profit; a genuinely experimental society cannot be dominated by the special interests of class privilege and the singular motive of private profit. ‘Since acceptance of the class theory of the state is the *sine qua non* of Marxism’, wrote Hook, ‘to be a Marxist means to be a revolutionist’.14

What did revolution mean? While Hook disparaged ‘the fetishism of non-violence’, he did not consider violence essential.15 Nor did he mean a mere takeover of the state: Hook distinguished revolutions from coups d’état, conspiracies, and putsches, and while he shared the basic radical definition of revolution as a seizure of state power, he underscored that it would be accomplished by mass action through the workers in motion, and that revolution must transform the state, abolish it, rather than wield it for narrow purposes. The central concept of this understanding of revolution was workers’ democracy, both as means and ends. Revolution had to come from below, with workers participating in their own liberation, toward the ultimate aim of workers’ control and power: direct rule in workplaces, offices, institutions, fields, and factories. The result would be a ‘government of producers’ shifting ‘the unit of representation . . . from a territorial to an occupational basis’.16

This required full freedom of organisation and expression, including the right to recall officials, through assemblies or councils. This understanding of a soviet democracy, a workplace-based representative system involving considerable elements of direct rule, was the heart of Hook’s conception in 1933 of the fruitful end-point of the irreconcilable class struggle.

In Hook’s later centrist-liberal thinking, all these key features of political theory – revolutionary action, principled opposition to capitalism, and the aim of workers’ democracy – would disappear. His loss of radical direction

meant that, despite a nominal attachment to pragmatism and socialism later in life, without recourse to revolutionary method, without the ultimate objective of worker’s democracy, Hook’s thought narrowed, his experimentalism withered away. He came unmoored from allegiance to the interests of the working class, hard in any circumstance for an intellectual to sustain. His egalitarian and democratic criticism of capitalism evaporated. He ceased to pay attention to ownership, property forms, class relations, and the social and economic system. The democratic ideal shrunk in his thought, from power to consent, from a redistribution of power to liberal formalism.

This left Hook in the very position of those he had found fault with in 1933. He never, of course, advocated economic determinism, historical fatalism, or positivism, but in his general political outlook the later Hook was ideologically close to Kautsky and Bernstein. It is as if, within twenty years, he became an archetype of the very evolutionary gradualist he had so astutely pilloried in *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx*. The early Hook of *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* might have had the later Hook in mind when ridiculing those who ‘appeal to the state, as the presumable representative of all classes, to correct the abuses of bourgeois society’; or when observing that democracy and liberty are hollow in societies where ‘what is liberty for one class is wage-slavery for another; what is democracy for one class is the formal cloak of dictatorship for another’; or when faulting those who, ‘giving their socialism a nationalistic twist . . . have become infected with a servile faith in the bourgeois state’.17

Hook liked to think of himself as, throughout his life, a consistently independent thinker – *Out of Step*, as his memoir’s title put it – and he called himself a social democrat to the end. But Hook had changed, and in method, not just specific judgments. When Hook, while calling himself a social democrat, voted for Richard M. Nixon in 1972 and Ronald Reagan in 1980, when he called in the 1950s for stripping Communist teachers of their position on the basis of party membership regardless of classroom conduct, he was guided by a very different method from that he followed in the 1930s. In a nutshell, the difference was that socialist revolution no longer animated his commitments. Hook preserved a residual, sentimental attachment to Marx, but he was no longer a Marxist.

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No wonder that a book that originally appeared on the fiftieth anniversary of Marx’s death has taken seventy years to reappear. Hook’s enthusiasm for ‘the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order’, a serious proposition in 1933, remains a serious proposition even now, however remote its probability. A savvy and scrappy political combatant across his life, Hook had no interest in passing ammunition across the barricades to his opponents on his left.

The fatuous neoconservative notion that Hook matured from youthful naïveté toward wisdom – that because Hook aged so must we – is disproved by the fact that Hook suffered a creative decline, not just a political retreat, in the postwar period. The paradox of Sidney Hook’s thought is that while, by conventional measurements (renown, prestige, influence, power), he reached his apex in the 1950s and 1960s, his writings from that period now seem rote, formalistic, and predictable, of far less interest than the boldness displayed when he was a young upstart in the 1930s.

The thought of the young Hook does not provide every answer to the present-day impasse of the Left. It does have great value. Far from immature, Hook’s revolutionary writing is striking for its poise, sophistication, and logical power. The reissue of *Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx* allows us to sit once again with the brilliant and radical young Hook, a thinker who has much to tell us, even if many of his utterances are of the sort his later self could not and would not abide.

**References**


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18 Hook 2002, p. 68.
The mean streets of New York have seldom been meaner. Blood does not just run in them, it gallops, spilled by blades and bludgeons that slice and crack the bodies of the past in a violence that is at once ritualised and reverential. Martin Scorsese’s *The Gangs of New York*, a $120 million epic inspired by Herbert Asbury’s 1928 ‘informal history’ of the same name, commences with a fictitious 1846 gang battle in the Paradise Square, heart of the infamous Five Points district of lower Manhattan, pitting Bill ‘The Butcher’ Cutting and his Protestant ‘Know Nothing’ nativists against the Irish Catholic immigrant forces of Priest Vallon and the Dead Rabbits.

**Historical hurt: ‘The blood stays on the blade’**

This opening scene of gore and mayhem, in which the white snow is soon stained various shades of red and pink, sets the cinematic stage, with the victorious Butcher withdrawing his knife from Vallon’s chest, affording an opportunity for the close-up gush of spurting blood, a kind of Scorsese ‘money shot’. ‘Ears and noses are the trophies of the day’, proclaims Cutting to the triumphant nativist ranks as the defeated Dead Rabbits stand oddly subdued, the entire combative lot looking, many commentators have remarked, as if they stepped off a set cast midway between

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1. This paper was first presented to Toronto’s Marxist Institute in February 2003, and the author is grateful to the audience for its critical comment.
Braveheart and Mad Max, the weaponry eerily reminiscent of some working-class street-warfare equivalent of the gynaecological instruments of Dead Ringers.3

Yet this surreal gladiatorial imagery is introduced by a scene of seeming incongruity, marked by consummate gentleness. A supposedly celibate priest tutors his motherless son about life’s harshness, and the need to keep them always in mind. As he prepares for the impending battle with a meticulous toilet, Vallon shaves while his young boy, Amsterdam, watches in the shadows. A father’s hand passes a blood-stained straight razor to his son, who starts to wipe the red residue on the bottom of his jacket. ‘No son, never’, admonishes the priest, who continues with caring guidance, ‘The blood stays on the blade... Someday you’ll understand.’4

This insistence that the historical blood stays on the blade is Scorsese’s under-appreciated accomplishment, a metaphor of history’s hurt that is suggestively extended into a range of complex realms associated with United States class and state formation. To be sure, the odd mainstream critic does indeed gesture toward this fundamental historicisation. Jami Bernard of the New York Daily News ends her review, ‘Scorsese & the Age of Violence,’ with brief, if historically misguided and somewhat pejorative, allusion to what she claims is The Gangs of New York’s large truth, ‘that today’s melting pot is yesterday’s witches’ brew’. More insightful, because it offers at least a few words of elaboration upon such a rhetorical one-liner, is A.O. Scott’s New York Times ‘To Feel a City Seethe’. Scott appreciates Scorsese’s ambition, the creation of ‘a narrative of historical change,’ constructed ‘from the ground up’. Moreover, Scott grasps the uniqueness of this presentation: ‘There is very little in the history of American cinema to prepare us for the version of American history Mr. Scorsese presents here. It is not the usual triumphalist story of moral progress and enlightenment, but rather a blood-soaked revenger’s tale, in which the modern world arrives in the form of a line of soldiers firing into a crowd.’5

But such gestures toward the reciprocities of past and present hardly abound in the reviews, most of which are incarcerated within the pageantry of specific personas: Daniel Day-Lewis’s riveting role as the Butcher, the rage level appropriate to the theatrical rendition supposedly primed by Day-Lewis blasting his eardrums non-stop with Eminem; Cameron Diaz’s miscast beautification of a ‘bludget’, the female pickpocket, Jenny Everdeane; and the rather unfortunate Leonardo DiCaprio, the film’s ‘star’ and narrator, Amsterdam Vallon, who finds himself ironically outclassed and overshadowed by the rough-hewn Day-Lewis and his mesmerising performance. While most critics swoon over the stunning Five Points set, constructed on the grounds

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3 See the depiction of weaponry in Scorsese 2002, p. 146.
4 For exact dialogue, I rely on Scorsese 2002. All quotes from dialogue in the film are from this source, unless otherwise stipulated.
5 Bernard 2002; Scott 2002.
of the Cinecitta studios in Rome and supervised by Dante Ferretti, one reviewer noted with irritation that the ‘fetish for authenticity’ – bought and properly paid for in the hiring of various consultants who advised actors, crew, and director on such essentials as Chinese opera, butchering, hand-lettered signs, and mid-nineteenth-century fighting techniques – got in the way of the drama.\(^6\)

Not surprisingly, however, historians (and New York journalism’s historically minded) and socialists first out of the gate with their comments have found the film’s lack of authenticity a disappointment, a point made most telling in Joshua Brown’s thoughtful London Review of Books ‘The Bloody Sixth’ and, in a journalistic equivalent, Pete Hamill’s Daily News ‘Trampling City’s History’. As J. Hoberman complains succinctly, Scorsese’s film is ‘a hothouse historical fantasy inspired by the already fantastic demimonde chronicles’ of Asbury, the result a reading of ‘the present back into history’ that ‘reimagines the past to suit itself . . . a lavish folly’. No\(^7\) Sexy Beast this, Hoberman dubs Gangs a very rough beast indeed, one ‘saddled with abundant backstory’. If history is not, à la Henry Ford, necessarily bunk, Scorsese stands condemned by some as turning it into little more than that.

**Scorsese: an unconscious Brecht in an unconscious age**

For the most part, I approach the film differently. If, as Fredric Jameson has argued, the one ‘transhistorical’ imperative of all Marxist, dialectical thought is the demand to ‘always historicize’!, it must be recognised that in cultural production, not unlike the actual research and writing of history, the issue of authenticity can never be reduced to the merely factual. Yet there is a difference separating historical from artistic productions, and the disciplines of dependency on evidence are obviously more rigorous within the writing of history than they can, or perhaps should, be in the making of historical film. As Jameson suggests, within the projects of theory and cultural criticism, a developing ‘metacommentary’ focuses less on ‘the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and appropriate it’. Jameson thus makes the case in The Political Unconscious for a specific aesthetics of presentation, the narrative form, alongside an understanding of interpretation’s primacy:

> These divergent and unequal bodies of work are here interrogated and evaluated from the perspective of the specific critical and interpretive task of the present volume, namely to restructure the problematics of ideology,
of the unconscious and desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of narrative, which I take to be (here using the shorthand of philosophical idealism) the central function or instance of the human mind. . . . I happen to feel that no interpretation can be effectively disqualified on its own terms by a simple enumeration of inaccuracies or omissions, or by a list of unanswered questions. Interpretation is not an isolated act, but takes place within a Homeric battlefield, on which a host of interpretive options are either openly or implicitly in conflict. If the positivistic conception of philological accuracy be the only alternative, then I would much prefer to endorse the current provocative celebration of strong misreadings over weak ones.\(^8\)

In short, art, unlike the writing of history, which combines a conceptual imagination with a rigorous and disciplined recourse to actualities of evidence and event, thrives first and foremost through its creative licence. That licence succeeds, for Marxists at least, if it historicises experience in ways that illuminate truths that are often obscured over time, and that have remained hidden from engagement precisely because large connections and continuities in historical process have been seemingly fractured by change, the tyranny of present-mindedness (which severs our lives from those of earlier generations), and the necessary but unfortunate limitations of painstaking scholarly reconstructions that often get the empirical detail of various trees right only to lose sight of the broad expanse of the forests of the longue durée.

Scorsese, I will suggest, has managed to do what few historians, and even fewer film-makers, can legitimately claim as accomplishment. In compressing mid-nineteenth-century history, he develops a narrative that leads inexorably toward some of the major sociopolitical dilemmas of a revolutionary encounter with the making of modern American class society. Something of an unconscious Bertolt Brecht of our times, Scorsese’s cast of Three Penny Opera characters has, in the past, included child prostitutes, delusional taxi-drivers, made guys, punch-drunk boxers, dirty cops, and other assorted and sordid urban hustlers. It is not surprising that he is enthralled by the gangs of an earlier epoch. Like Brecht, as Terry Eagleton has noted, Scorsese starts not from the ‘good old things’ so prevalent in what we might designate Hollywood’s capacity to nostalgise the past, but from the ‘bad new ones’ of our own unfortunate historical moment.\(^9\) His major films, from Mean Streets through Taxi Driver and Raging Bull to Good Fellas have never managed to step out of the confines of an almost obsessional fixation on the violence of the present, and although these films have made strong statements, they have always proven politically enclosed in ways that the historicised

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\(^8\) Jameson 1981, pp. 9, 13.

The Gangs of New York is not. As a consequence, Robert De Niro’s drift into pathology in Taxi Driver, while powerfully evocative as a representation of social crisis in the ‘post’-1960s decade of the 1970s, never manages to shake loose of a fundamentally alienated individuality. When Travis Bickle stands defiant before a full-length mirror, asking, ‘Are you talking to me?’, his tone increasingly one of menacing belligerence, Scorsese is not necessarily able to draw us into this one-way conversation. Indeed, we want no part of it. But in Amsterdam’s voice-over commentaries in The Gangs of New York, or in the Butcher’s racist soliloquies, it is impossible not to engage with the politicised meanings of collective historical process, however unsettling they may be. If Scorsese’s film thus stands very much as one director’s urban myth creation, it nevertheless works on the large, often Brueghel-like cinematic canvas, precisely because its art of representation intersects with historical developments in insightful and stimulating ways. The film does talk to us as Marxists, I would maintain, if only we can get past the tyrannical fetishisation of ‘factuality’ to glimpse the wider worlds of class and state formation as they were made in the mid-nineteenth century, and as that making lived on, in various ways, over the course of the next one hundred and fifty years.

Historical authenticity and film

Historians have of late commented much on film, and their judgements often turn on various ‘truth tests’. In a way, this is oddly out-of-step with contemporary discussion of historiography and historical method, given that in certain avant-garde historical circles ‘truth’ itself, and the possibility of achieving it in any authorial narrative of the past, is generally regarded with scepticism. So, too, have historians questioned the ways in which evidence itself is constructed, asking of seemingly routinely generated sources such as the census how they came to be and what their relationship was to evolving structures of power and the not inconsiderable authority of an ‘archives of knowledge’. Imagine asking of Foucault’s histories of sexuality or of the meanings of prison discipline if they are, in actuality, ‘true’, or arguing forcefully for the ultimate ‘truth’ of a newspaper account or a case file: I can hear the peels of jaundiced laughter from the high pews of contemporary theory’s sophisticates. Why do we expect the transparency of truth and a discipline of balance in historical film-making, at the same time that we often let others, who work in much closer proximity to archives, evidence, and the layered sedimentation of historical experience, so easily off the hook?

Natalie Zemon Davis discusses authenticity in ways characteristic of historians’ demands of film, and no one, perhaps, has more experience than Davis in actually

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10 Two helpful overviews are Kelly 1980 and Connelly 1991.
working through the creation of an historical film, her role in *The Return of Martin Guerre* being somewhat exceptional. Moreover, Davis grapples sensitively with the ways in which the creations of film and historical writing differ, but are also grounded in specific common concerns.\textsuperscript{11} She cites two reasons that historical films go off-track. Davis is critical, for example, of Hollywood’s underestimation of film audiences, and the almost ubiquitous suggestion that mainstream cinema distorts the past the better to make it palpable to audiences suffocating in their present-mindedness. Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad*, for instance, was said to have pandered to what he imagined to be contemporary film-goers’ need to have the past relate simply and clearly to modern experience, a reductionism that Davis rightly deplores.\textsuperscript{12} But, more relevantly for any discussion of *The Gangs of New York*, Davis singles out a habit of cinematic production that demonstrates ‘too cavalier an attitude toward the evidence about lives and attitudes in the past’.\textsuperscript{13}

This is a tall-order critique, for most historians would, if answering honestly, accent how humble we should be when claiming knowledge of attitudes in the past. Davis then hooks on to this deeply difficult issue an injunction that, ‘We must respect that evidence, accepting it as given, and let the imagination work from there’. The phrase that evidence must be accepted ‘as given’, necessarily gives one cause to pause, but granting Davis the benefit of certain doubts, it is apparent that, for her, making films and making histories, save perhaps for the pride of place reserved for dramatisation in cinematic productions, are similar creative projects. Yet I am not so convinced that film should operate by the same rules as those we have elaborated for historical texts, especially given that some historians clearly do not recognise the rules of evidence that Davis alludes to (although I would agree with what I take to be Davis’s main point, that evidence should be grappled with seriously, something that is ironically too often lost sight of in the textualism of our times).

Davis moves on to even more narrowly confining ledges:

If . . . we still decide to depart from the evidence – say in creating a composite character or changing a time frame – then it should be in the spirit of the evidence and plausible, not misleading. Exceptionally, a historical film might move significantly away from the evidence out of playfulness or an experiment with counter-factuality, but then the audience should be let in on the game and not be given the impression of a ‘true story’.

Counter-factual aside, for surely no director is concerned with arguments about historical method, circa 1972, Davis’s position, for all its attractiveness, constructs the

\textsuperscript{11} See, among other statements, Benson 1988, pp. 55–8.
\textsuperscript{13} Zemon Davis 2000, p. 130.
problem of authenticity in rather narrow ways, precisely because it locates an historical film’s ‘truth testing’ within the parameters of affirmation of ascertainable ‘facts’: the nature of costumes; the location and character consistencies of specific historical individuals; the sequence of events. What is the meaning of a film-maker’s adherence to ‘the spirit of the evidence’? How are we to ascertain if a direction taken is plausible, rather than misleading? Surely these caveats are centrally about interpretation, and where the possibilities of history’s meanings lie. These are large, often contentious, matters, not easily reducible to ways of presenting history so as to convince readers and viewers of its authenticity. We may know, with some certainty, what Civil War soldiers wore, but are we so easily in agreement about what the historical meaning of the Civil War indeed was? How, if issues of authenticity are broached in this way, extending beyond the questions we can answer decisively into arenas where conflicting historical opinion certainly exists, are we to ascertain just how audiences might ‘be let in on the game’, and the explanation of creative licence professed? It is a question easier asked than answered, unless one reverts to the most banal of significations.

Would we really want Ken Russell’s The Devils, a film that speaks to the almost timeless themes of power, hypocrisy, and evil’s corruptions as much as it does to medieval witchcraft and its suppression by established authorities of Church and State, to fly warning flags concerning historical ‘authenticity’ in the face of its viewers? Is this not also underestimating an audience’s capacity to make discriminating judgements?

Taken in this light, Davis’s injunctions, as sensible as they appear on the surface, tend to bypass what I would consider historical film’s most significant emancipatory potential, the capacity to make the past speak to our present without boiling it down to digestible ‘authenticities’. Larger relational truths that, in Marxist terms, are central motifs in the making of the modern world, will tend to get lost in the shuffle to produce realities of everyday life and chronological validities and comprehensiveness. Highly complex and historically developed processes such as class and state formation

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14 I happen to agree with the general argument about the significance and meaning of the Civil War, propounded by radicals since the time of Marx, and running through the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and into the best modern historical writing, such as that of James M. McPherson. This stresses the revolutionary character of the confrontation. That said, there remain questions even within Marxist analysis. For instance, precisely because the victory of bourgeois forces in the Civil War was inevitable, given the timing of the conflict and the historically situated development of the productive forces, the class meanings of the Civil War are still open to different analytical accents. McPherson’s tilt on the $300 commutation fee, for instance, is apparently to downplay its material significance on the grounds that there were ways around paying and the state, at various levels, orchestrated loopholes. Yet McPherson recognises the fee’s symbolic importance as a visible reminder of inequality (albeit too lightly in my judgement). This, and other evidence, conditions McPherson’s argument that making too much of the draft and adhering to the claim that the Civil War was a rich man’s war, but a poor man’s fight, overstates the significance of draftees (who comprised only 74,000 of the 1,000,000 men Lincoln called for and got to fight for the North). This may be true enough, but the class symbolism of the $300 exemption fee was a powerful factor in mobilising working-class resentments. See Walsh 2003b.

15 Ironically, some historians found Zemon Davis’s involvement in The Return of Martin Guerre problematic in this very area. See, for instance, Finlay 1988. Note the further statements of Zemon Davis 1987; 1988.
or the problematic character of collective solidarities criss-crossed with fragmentations of race, gender, and national identity, all of which are pivotal in understanding why revolution has both been an absolute imperative for humanity and an undertaking that has almost universally failed, are inevitably obscured in this constricted appreciation of historicisation.

What must be acknowledged is that the imperatives of social history’s evolution may well take us in this narrow direction of the reproduction of authentic detail regardless of larger issues of interpretation and meaning. Social historians once imagined their project as one of liberating historical research and its dramas from the limitations of an ideological consensual historiography. Their agenda was, it could be suggested, a radical provisioning of pasts locked into specific paradigms. ‘Histories from below’ and studies of subaltern groups, as well as attention to resistance, not to mention scrutiny of theories associated with Marx and other radical Enlightenment thinkers, all spoke in a 1960s idiom of challenge that was rooted in the desire to turn the interpretive tables and stand ‘history’ on its proverbial head. But social history has moved off this ground and, along with the new cultural history, has located new subject matters, new theoretical frameworks, and is now coloured by new perspectives, few of which embrace revolution as a desired end. Social histories have developed in ways distanced from the working class and its collective struggles, and have recently accented subjectivity, liberal order consensus, and varied accommodations and adaptations. As insightful as are studies orchestrated by such concerns, they are differentiated from the radical understandings of a useable past that animated social history’s beginnings. Whereas the general strike or the riotous confrontation figured as central subjects two and three decades ago, we now have studies of tourism, royal pageantishes, and the debutante ball.

This is not unrelated to how historians approach the issue of historical film and authenticity. For, as social historians have increasingly valorised subjectivity over collectivity, and immersed themselves in the spectacle and the micro-experience, insisting on the equally politicised weight of realms perhaps once understood as somewhat removed from the directly political, our conceptualisation of the dimensions of the political has expanded and, it might be suggested, inevitably suffered dilution. In the process we may reify detail over political engagement. Many historians relate to film, I think, out of this new, and somewhat politically problematic, context. Thus, contemporary comment on film and history that strikes too literalist a note on authenticity may invariably be limiting film’s possibilities, just as social history has become, over the last decade, increasingly distanced from its 1960s origins in a political project of remaking the social order, constraining its engagement with a transformative project. Marxists demand more of film (and of history), because more is at stake than ‘art for art’s sake’ (although by this I do not suggest some blunt demand that all art merely serve class-struggle ends, and that we must see some kind of Stalinist socialist
realism as the only ‘true’ political aesthetic), more at stake than ‘historical authenticity for authenticity’s sake’.16

Film-makers, it needs to be pointed out, do not see any of this as a problem. They understand, for the most part, that they are not putting historical fact on film. Their purpose is rarely one of making histories visually true, but of presenting histories that relate to the intersections of past and present. To stop the histories of the past, at any given ‘moment’, and expect film-makers to both get detail and continuity right, is not only asking a lot, it may be demanding that a gutting of any potential politics take place in the name of ‘authenticity’. John Sayles, criticised by historians for playing fast and loose with the ‘facts’ of Matewan’s past, getting details of mining experience wrong,17 offered the rejoinder that he deliberately reconfigured the historical terrain the better to convey through an atypical event, the Matewan Massacre, a larger representative history.18 In a sense, the issue is even more elastic than Sayles’s defence, because it could well be the case that an ‘historical’ film would collapse historical experience into a particular periodisation doing actual violence to a specific timeframe, but use a kind of narrative to do grander justice to historical trends and experiences. What, historians who do not have such licence need to be asking themselves, can be wrong with such a representational strategy given the paucity of historical consciousness that exists in our times?19 The slight, we as historians must recognise, is less on movie-goers in the twenty-first century, than it is on ourselves as ‘practitioners’ and ‘dues-payers’ of a particular guild.

The Gangs of New York and the detail of (non-)authenticity

What is wrong with Scorsese’s The Gangs of New York? The list is long, starting with the pivotal place of gangs and race riots.

The Dead Rabbits-Bowery Boy Riot took place on 4 July 1857, and had no connection to the traumatic events of the Draft Riots of 1863, in which no naval bombardment of the Five Points district ever took place. Indeed, the Five Points, although it was the site of rioting, was hardly the epicentre of the Draft Riots outbreak, which probably left approximately 120 dead: the concentrated fighting was uptown in streets in the 20s and 30s, strongholds of the Republican Party. While Scorsese’s historical consultant, Luc Sante, declares with certainty that ‘the core of the participants [in the Draft Riots]

16 Ramirez 1999.
17 Brier 1988; Dubofsky 1990; and the more sympathetic discussion of Matewan and historical criticism in Newsinger 1995.
19 With respect to The Gangs of New York, it needs to be recognised that those making the film were not unaware that they were doing violation to the ‘authentic’ record of the past, in as much as they were cognisant of how they were blurring chronology and event into a congealed presentation of a fiction that was nevertheless rooted in a general historicisation. See Scorsese 2002; Anbinder and Cocks 2002.
unquestionably came from the Five Points’, more scrupulous research has established that only two of the hundreds of rioters arrested could be established to have been residents of the infamous Sixth Ward. But the anti-black pogrom in the Five Points was nevertheless virulent, and interested Democratic Party attempts to depict the ‘Bloody Sixth’ as free of riotous taint in 1863 were little more than cover-ups. Mobs of hundreds of Irish attacked African-American workplaces, bars employing black waiters, the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, and shanties, boarding-houses, and tenements in which blacks resided, many of them on Baxter Street. Buildings were torched (although not the Five Points Mission), blacks were beaten in the streets, and rough musickings were the nightly norm. Three days of violence convinced most African-Americans in the Five Points that ‘their only safety is in flight’. This capped forty years of insecurity for blacks in the Sixth Ward. In the 1820s, the African-American population of the district had been roughly 15 per cent (or twice the norm throughout New York City) of those living in the congested slum. But many blacks left the Five Points after a series of anti-abolitionist riots and confrontations in the 1830s and 1840s; the 1863 debacle drove the final African-American population of the Five Points into retreat, where it settled in safer havens such as Long Island. Once home to over 1,000 blacks, the Five Points, which claimed a black population of just under 400 in 1863, recorded only 132 ‘coloured’ residents in the 1870 census.20

Despite this obvious openness to racism, a nativist leader such as Bill Cutting would never have set himself up in the Five Points, let alone come to have ruled the rookeries of the rough fare, demographic, commercial, and cultural, that intersected the old Anthony, Orange, and Cross Streets. For the dominant immigrant population was Irish Catholic. A Know Nothing like Butcher Bill had no base in the Five Points: in an 1856 presidential election, the Democratic candidate polled an overwhelming majority of 574 votes, outdistancing his Republican and nativist rivals who managed between them to secure a meagre 25 ballots. Indeed, Cutting’s actual inspiration, the real-life Bill ‘the Butcher’ Poole, memorialised in Asbury’s The Gangs of New York, plied his trade, his Know-Nothingism, and his legendary prowess in the bar-room brawl in what is now Christopher Street and the West Village piers, rather than in the Sixth Ward itself. Shot in the heart by Irish gang leader John Morrissey in a Broadway saloon on a bitter cold 1855 night, Poole clung to life for two weeks before dying, his last words, ‘Good-bye boys, I die a true American’, destined to be appropriated as the rallying cry of nativist forces, who gathered 5,000 strong to march ‘The Butcher’s’ body through New York streets in a declaration of martyrdom.21

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21 Asbury 1928, pp. 81–100.
As James M. McPherson has suggested, Scorsese’s understanding of this Democratic Party hegemony, especially the pivotal role of its anti-Civil-War wing and its ties to New York City’s mercantile élite, which sealed a pro-Southern plantocracy alliance of the richest and poorest (decidedly not the skilled, organised working-class) segments of the North’s metropolitan capital is scant indeed. The film does far too little in exploring the ugly politics of this Democratic Party faction, bypassing such figures as Fernando Wood of the Mozart Hall group, who called for New York to secede from the Union in 1861. Wood and his fellow pro-Confederacy ‘Copperheads’ utilised their power and their control of sections of the press (Wood’s brother Benjamin was a long-time editor of the New York Daily News, the largest circulation daily in the United States at the time) to fan the flames of racist animosity. They used a recent history of blacks being driven from the New York docks as strike-breakers in June of 1863, as well as a tense economic climate in which rising rents, higher food prices, and a rash of trade-union organising signalled, in the words of Fincher’s Trade Review, ‘The Upheaving Masses in Motion!’ to exacerbate fears among workers that hoards of freed slaves were about to invade Northern cities such as New York and overrun job markets long designated the ‘property’ of ‘white labour’. In adding insult to injury, according to the ‘Copperheads’, the Northern white working class was being asked to fight a war that was destined to lead to its economic and social ruination.22

Beyond these lapses in authenticity and problems of adequate coverage of the lay of the contemporary political land in The Gangs of New York lie a plethora of what some historians will designate ‘howlers’. The cavernous underground tunnels in which Amsterdam retreats to have Jenny lick his wounds, replete with its background of stone ledges lined with skulls, could not have existed in the Five Points, whose marshy subsoil defies such a labyrinth. Scorsese’s depiction of the New York City Chinese in the early 1860s is perhaps seemingly the most egregious pushing of the authenticity envelope: constructed as pig-tailed and inscrutable, but commercially adept enough to entice the nativists to celebrate at their Mott Street Sparrow’s Chinese Pagoda, in which Oriental acrobats bounce off the floor and caged prostitutes are suspended from the ceiling, auctioned off by none other than P.T. Barnum, the Chinese hate the Butcher and have a silent agreement with Amsterdam. In actuality, the Asian population in or adjacent to the Five Points in 1863 was tiny to the point of being inconsequential, and Chinese immigration to New York City did not begin in earnest until after completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Just as Chinatown would be an actual creation post-dating the period in which The Gangs of New York is set, so too would be the authority of a central figure in the film, William ‘Boss’ Tweed of Tammany Hall. In the time period in which Amsterdam pursues his revenge

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of his father’s killing at the hands of Bill Cutting, Tweed was indeed climbing the ladder, but his Ring would not control New York until later in the 1860s and 1870s. Nor would Barnum’s American Museum burn in 1863, during the Draft Riots, but in 1868, or public hangings, the last of which happened in 1835, be a part of the political theatre of the early 1860s.

Finally, although no reviewer to my knowledge (historian or film critic) has mentioned this, there is scant evidence, if any, that cross-dressing fairies, or ‘She-He’s’, would have frequented the Five Points with such confidence that they would walk the streets openly and cause barely a ripple of notice in public dances put on by proselytizing Protestants. To be sure, the Bowery border of the Five Points was an early promenade of all manner of sexually open and transgressive characters, and the Sixth Ward was infamous as a centre of commercialised vice, but even George Chauncey’s diligent searches have found no reference to Five Points’ fairies. The closest we can come to locating such a ‘She-He’ presence anywhere near the Sixth Ward is the late 1870s Armory Hall dance pavilion at the corner of the Lower East Side’s Hestor and Elizabeth Streets, where an Irish sex and entertainment entrepreneur, Billy McGlory, hired half a dozen men who powdered and rouged themselves, sometimes dressing in feminine attire, to entertain high-rollers and big-spenders with a risqué sexual ‘circus’ in the curtained privacy of solitary booths. McGlory was a graduate of the Five Points, and bare-knuckled it in the 1850s with the Forty Thieves and Chichesters, but his Armory Hall was a night haunt and its offerings hardly the norm of daylight hours.  

More serious because it is more sinister, as Joshua Brown has suggested, is Scorsese’s residual assimilation of Asbury’s reproduction and sensationalising of the nineteenth-century missionary slum literature, epitomised by Matthew Hale Smith’s *Sunshine and Shadow in New York* (1868), in which the Five Points is constructed as a degraded netherworld of vice and violence, an anarchistic orgy of brutality and criminality coincident with the arrival of the immigrant Irish. ‘A culture of poverty’ in which the belligerence of the ‘underclass’ is accented, suggests Brown, excuses the nativism that animated Asbury and that paints the gangs and the Five Points district itself in bold, ‘larger-than-life’ strokes that distort the history of oppression within which the immigrant Irish worked and suffered. As Happy Jack, a one-time Dead Rabbit turned ‘crusher’ cop, escorts a sight-seeing crew of uptown ladies and gentlemen through the Five Points, he waxes eloquent on the Irish arrival in America: ‘Ah, but only shattered dreams await them. Pauperism and dereliction. Drunkenness and depravity.

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Molestation and murder, kind sirs and ladies.’ Evangelicals flit through the film, deploiring the God-forsaken vice, misery and squalor of the Sixth Ward. ‘They said it was the worst slum in the world’, Amsterdam narrates, ‘To us it was home.’ And, in Scorsese’s construction, the gangs are the families of the Five Points. But archaeological evidence unearthed in the early 1990s, with the construction of a new court house in an old neighbourhood of what was once The Bloody Sixth, tells a different tale. Some 850,000 artefacts were uncovered, and while the job of dating precisely these remnants of the past was never done, they do suggest a varied socio-economic life considerably at odds with the Asbury-Scorsese myth-making. The assortment of buttons, needles, fabrics, medicine bottles, combs, hairbrushes, and crockery dug out of the bowels of an old Sixth Ward block hints at the robust presence of home work and family routines that have unfortunately been overshadowed by the extravagant depiction of ‘the dark side’ all too prominent in nineteenth-century accounts of the Five Points upon which both Asbury and Scorsese have drawn uncritically.25

Born of resistance to the impersonal cash nexus of the wage relation and the ‘market revolution’, gangs were marked with the mechanic accents of dishevelled trades and rough labours resistant to the encroachments of capitalism, which increasingly brought under its sway the relations of master and man in various tanneries, distilleries, slaughterhouses, modest manufactories (producing looking glasses, umbrellas, shoes), tobacco works, furniture-producing sheds, building sites, artisanal trades, and on public works projects and the docks of the transatlantic trade. This process also demanded class subordination in the wider non-work worlds of politics and culture. The gangs, in their recalcitrance, were complemented by other arenas of youthful masculine associational life, including fire companies, local militias, and target and sporting clubs.

All of this was played out not only in the mayhem of the so-called ‘ancient laws of combat’ so extolled by Scorsese in his depiction of the almost constitutionalist courts of conflict participated in by various gangs – Shirt Tails, Plug Uglies, Daybreak Boys, Chichesters, American Guards, Little Forty Thieves, Roach Guards, Native Americans, Bowery Boys – but also through the film’s protagonists, The Butcher and the Vallons (father and son). It left its mark on and was influenced by the emerging radical, and often German-led, trade-union movement, a point stressed by one of the few explicitly socialist reviews of The Gangs of New York that suggests something positive in Scorsese’s contribution, Mike Davis’s ‘The Bloody Streets of New York’. Davis feels that Scorsese gets the squalor and oppression of the Five Points right, differentiating him from other historians. But he fixes his sights on what Scorsese (and indeed almost every other reviewer) has missed. For New York’s mid-century

immigration stream was not merely fed by tributaries of starving, cholera-ridden, job and freedom-seeking Irish.

As late as 1860, New York’s major Old World population, its 203,000 Irish immigrants, was rivaled seriously in terms of the newly-arrived only by some 118,000 Germans. Broadly speaking, these Germans had been forged in different circumstances than those of the destitute Irish, the failed revolutionary impulses of 1848 being of paramount importance. Yet there were some within the Irish diaspora, such as radical Fenians, who connected with German radicalism (as well as with the smaller enclaves of Scottish Jacobins and English Chartists), especially in New York’s Lower East Side Kleindeutschland, a 400 city-block area adjacent to the Five Points, encompassing the city’s Tenth, Eleventh, Thirteenth and Seventeenth Wards. There, German socialists and communists toiled for wages and struggled to build a workers’ movement that united ethnicities and trades. Roughly fifteen per cent of New York’s population in these years was German-born, and thoughts of the red promise of 1848 and its barricades still permeated a consciousness of producer rights, labour-capital conflict, and social justice. This heritage reached forward from the nascent beginnings of labour radicalism in the 1850s into struggles for the shorter working day in the 1860s and 1870s, culminating in the massive successes of the New York City Knights of Labor, which contained subterranean cells of anarcho-communist influence in a secret order within the order known as the Home Club. The Henry George mayoralty campaign of 1886, a mobilisation that came dangerously close to securing power for the working class in the country’s major metropolitan centre, was perhaps the culmination of this nineteenth-century politics of class struggle, which achieved the 1880s designation, ‘The Great Upheaval’.

Despite overlapping connections among the differentiated working-class constituencies of this at times generalised upsurge, the day labourers and sweated workers of the Irish Five Points travelled Scorsese’s meanest streets, and their historical experience was never quite that of the artisanal proletarianisation and radicalism associated with German New York. Irish gang lives and fire company raucousness pegged them as ‘traditionalists’ in their politically unconscious resistance. In 1863, they rioted against the Draft, and its $300 exemption for the ‘socially superior’; they resented the rich, but they killed their poor black brothers and sisters. Among German radicals, such ‘traditionalist’ hostilities to established bourgeois power were scorned, and as Irish and nativist gangs battled throughout the 1850s, knocking heads and eventually exchanging primitive pistol fire in the crooked alleyways off the Bowery, European immigrant rebels embraced abolitionism, variants of anticapitalism, co-operation, and trade unionism. During the Depression of 1857, as the Dead Rabbits honed their weapons, German radicals combined with Irish and native American labour figures to beat back the rising tide of unemployment. When the Draft Riots erupted in 1863, many dissident Germans repudiated the deadly formalisation of class privilege.
embodied in the exemption fee, just as they condemned the vicious attacks on black Americans as a tragic division of the ranks of the powerless. But the radicals could not keep the anti-black, largely Irish Catholic mob in check, and were soon swept off the streets as the ugliness of the moment brushed class solidarities aside in the name of an incendiary racist revenge.26

With this much wrong and missing from Scorsese’s film what can be right and powerfully suggestive about it? In a word, quite a bit.

Class politics and the Janus vision of a fragmented working class

The message of Scorsese’s film is not so much that America was made in its bloody streets, as so many critics claim with interpretive certainty and ease. Rather, The Gangs of New York is suggestive of a more two-sided historical exchange. At the core of Scorsese’s representation is, to be sure, the impulse ‘from below’, the place of the rough culture of masculine muscle and the street authority of head-knocking violence and intimidation. As the Butcher puts it, with characteristic brutality:

The spectacle of fearsome acts. Someone steals from me, I cut off his hands. He offends me, I cut out his tongue. He rises against me, I cut off his head, and stick it on a pike. Hold it high in the streets so all can see. That’s what preserves the order of things.

But what is apparent in the film is that this plebeian power is never entirely removed from relations of reciprocity with other structures of order, in which the terrorism of established (and often quite ‘polite’) authority is more masked. In this sense, the violence of Scorsese’s mean streets is in reality more integrated with the institutions of class domination than most critics seem to grasp. The gangs exist in symbiotic relationship with other spheres: the police; the law; the political boss; agencies of discipline to which youth can be submitted for ‘an education’; the state. If this is not historically ‘true’, in all of the particular evidential detail, it is nevertheless true in a larger relational sense, and Scorsese is thus able to sustain analytical insights through his film that are in some ways beyond what historians can ‘prove’ with recourse to the archives. Moreover, The Gangs of New York conveys with panache a contest between one sector of the plebeian poor, with its backward-looking feudalistic understandings of American ‘loyalty’, and its class nemesis, a forward-marching bourgeoisie that

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26 The above paragraphs draw on Davis 2003, which contrasts markedly with other left commentary in Sustar 2003 and the even more vehement antagonism in Walsh 2003a. See, for background on labour organisation and German radicalism, Wilentz 1984; Schneider 1994; Levine 1986 and 1992; Wittke 1952; Binder and Reimers, 1995, pp. 59–92. For discussions of working-class typologies relevant to this period that include discussion of ‘traditionalism’ see Dawley and Faler 1976; Laurie 1980, pp. 53–66. On the Knights of Labor and the Home Club see Weir 2000, pp. 23–46.
would fashion its power and authority in production and exchange as well as out of the enticing carrot of ‘democracy’ and welfare provisioning, backed by the violent stick of the state’s repressive terror.

For all of Bill Cutting’s ‘ownership’ of the Five Points, it is an oddy feudal vassalage that is his due: ‘but in all the Five Points there’s nothin’ that runs, walks, or cocks his toes up don’t belong to Bill the Butcher’, Johnny tells Amsterdam as they walk through the streets of the Bloody Old Sixth. Tribute and loyalty are the gang leader’s due, his régime less one of accumulation than it is rightful obeisance, driven not so much by the relentless need, logic and laws of capitalist development, but by a purposeful resistance to winds of change:

Everything you see belongs to me, to one degree or another. The beggars and newsboys and quick thieves here in Paradise. The sailor dives and gin mills and blind tigers on the waterfront. The anglers and amusers, the She-Hes and Chinks. Everybody owes, and everybody pays. Because that’s how you stand up against the rising of the tide.

This is, first and foremost, an ideological stand, one made against inevitable historical defeat. As Tweed reminds the Butcher in a public encounter, ‘You’re a great one for fighting, Bill, I know, but you can’t fight forever.’ ‘I can go down doing it’, replies Cutting. ‘And you will’, is the Boss’s curt reply.

For Scorsese seldom lets us pass through those Paradise Alley/Five Points’ streets in which Amsterdam is tutored on the lord’s tithes without confronting a looming sign, ‘Money Lent’, symbolic of the new relations of the cash nexus that are everywhere transforming the meanings of everyday life for the plebeian masses and their rude seigneurial overlords. The film never allows us to forget that the gang leader’s proprietary right is fragile, precisely because it is in a state of transition. Defiant of capital and the state, the ‘muscle’ that the Butcher commands is clearly on its last legs in 1863, and Boss Tweed reminds the Butcher of this hard reality in words both deferential and demanding. Tweed pleads with Cutting to curb his excesses in the name of a larger prize of shared spoils:

Bill, I can’t get a day’s work done for all the good citizens coming in here to fret me about crime in the Points. Some, I’m horrified to say, have gone so far as to accuse Tammany of connivance with this so-called rampant criminality. What am I to do? I can’t have this. Something has to be done.

The Butcher, who knows well that Tweed controls the police, is able to at first shrug the problem off with an offering of a public hanging to appease the malcontented, and the expectation that, in the end, since the state and its armed force appears to him a malleable tool of specific interests, the politicians ought to be able to get ‘the crushers’, or cops, to do whatever is needed. Tweed is aghast at the crudity of the

For a time, the old street power and the new machine politics of an emerging capitalist state work in tandem. But, in the end, the alliance must crack, for the Butcher knows only raw power and its threat of fearsome acts: ‘Mulberry Street and Worth. Cross and Orange and Little Water. Each of the Five Points is a finger, and when I close my hand the whole territory is a fist. I can turn it against you.’ Tweed, emblematic of the capitalist project of hegemony, has a wider vision, in which ‘progress’ pays:

But we’re talking about different things, Bill. I’m talking about civic duty. Responsibilities we owe to the people. Schools and hospitals, sewers and utilities; street construction, repairs and sweeping. Business licences, saloon licences, carting licenses . . . streetcars, ferries, rubbish disposal. There’s a power of money to be made in this city, Bill. With your help, the people can be made to understand that all of these things are best kept within what I like to call the Tammany family. Which is why I’m talking about an alliance between our two great organizations.

Just as the declining powers of feudal Europe bartered for a time their fading longevity, placating an emerging bourgeoisie, Cutting and Tweed dance their mutual material attraction through much of Scorsese’s film. But, ultimately, the Butcher’s ragged honour, soiled to its violent core by his commitment to an ideology of nativist and racist entitlement, cloaked in the convenient garb of patriotic ‘Americanism’, is incapable of being as pliant as Tweed, whose instincts, like those of capital, are to turn every profit, whatever the ‘price’ and with whomever will enhance the prospects of this happening. Eventually, Bill will no longer play. He wants no part of anything that will ‘befoul his [father’s] legacy by givin’ this country over to them what’s had no hand in the fighting for it? Why? Because they come off a boat, crawling with lice and beggin’ you for soup?’ Cutting believes in history, however distorted his sense of the past; for him, the blood truly does stay on the blade. Tweed, Henry Fordesque in his willingness to massage the historical past into whatever suits the accumulative appetites of the present, informs Bill, ‘you’re turning your back on your future’. ‘Not our future’, replies the Butcher. By the end of the film, the Butcher’s absolutist Five Points ‘state’ and the rising bourgeoisie of the capitalist nation are mortal enemies. Tweed bemoans the outcome, ‘You don’t know what you’ve done to yourself’. Cutting is, ironically, the more eloquent:

You think lighting strikes when you talk, Mr. Tweed, but I can’t hardly hear you. . . . I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. So because you are lukewarm, and are neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. You can build your filthy world without me. . . . Come down to the
Points again and you’ll be dispatched by mine own hand. Now go back to your celebration and let me eat in peace. I’ve paid you fair.

The film ends for the Butcher as it began, but with the mythical gang leader on the opposite end of the knife. ‘Its fair’, Cutting might well have remembered himself saying, ‘a touch indelicate, but fair.’

But Tweed’s victory, a metaphor for capital’s capacity to vanquish ‘the ancient’ powers of its plebeian challengers, is not possible without new pacts with sectors of the subaltern classes. In Amsterdam and the revived Irish immigrant Dead Rabbits, Tweed finds a forceful alliance, one that seals his victory with the glue of incorporation, the rising youth gang leader bartering for political representation and grasping the potential power of the Luxemburgist mass uprising:

There’s more of us coming off these ships every day. I heard fifteen thousand Irish a week. And we’re afraid of the Natives? Get all of us together and we ain’t got a gang, we got an army. Then all you need is a spark. Something to wake us all up.

As the Draft Riots provide that first spark, ignited in the resentments of the poor against the rich and their capacity to buy the continued lives of their sons with a few hundred dollars, Scorsese suggests, through Amsterdam’s groping toward class consciousness, the coming conflagration that pits labour irrevocably against capital:

From all over the city they came. Ironworkers, factory boys, day laborers, schoolteachers, street cleaners. . . . Irish, American, Polish, German, anyone who never cared about slavery or the Union – whole or sundered. . . . The Earth was shaking now, but we was the only ones who didn’t know it.

And because they did not know it, because the Earth’s shaking took place with workers handicapped in their state of unconsciousness, the waking up did not happen.

The first cries of the Draft Riots were screams of class rage. ‘Nobody goes to work today. They shut the factories down.’ Outraged yells of, ‘The Hell with your damned Draft!’, were punctuated by images of rioters ripping the doors of a mansion open, smashing exquisite vases and splintering a billiards table. The symbolism of such acts was unmistakable: ‘Let’s smash the bastards to hell!’ Material meanings were posed with blunt determination: ‘Hey! There’s a three-hundred dollar man. Get him!’ But all of this quickly give way to the sorry descent into racist vendetta. As a woman in the crowd yells, ‘Come on, lads! Kill the nigger bastards! String them up!’, the Draft Riots move rapidly out of their articulation of class resentments and into sickening scenes of lynching, beating, and burning alive scapegoated African-Americans, a hideous carnage of white rage. And the Natives and the Dead Rabbits square off. Class struggle is overwhelmed by intra-class warfare: white against black; white against the not-quite-white-enough.
The ultimate victor is the newly consolidated state, with its special bodies of armed men subduing its unconscious proletarian challenge (ordered by the feudal gangs) as a prefatory volley to its subjugation of the seigneurial slave régime. Capital wrought its vengeance against the first deformed working-class insurrection that struggled to unfold in New York’s streets in 1863, just as it would crush the regionalised power of a counterposed ‘order’ premised on unfree labour. Thousands of federal troops, many of them working-class Irish New Yorkers, slashed into and fired upon crowds of their mothers and sisters, uncles and cousins. New York streets succumbed, as would Savannah plantations. Scores of the poor dropped in the bloody streets of New York metropolitan industrialisation, just as poor whites would fall throughout the slave South. The corpse of Northern, urban class struggle was riddled with the bullets and bayonets of a state that was about to extend its colonisation and conquest of a way of life incompatible with the ever-widening ethos of the market revolution and its demanding extensions of the reach of accumulation and exploitation. As one of the Scottish actors, the Irish Nativist McGloin, comments, in summing up his sense of what the film is about:

[P]olitics is an extension of war by other means. Looking at the period in which the film takes place, the tension between these two outlooks seems to be present, because there’s a brutal, intense warfare happening between the gangs. But this tribalism is ultimately superseded when the big guns come. Who’s got the big guns? The state. And the way the film covers that enormous scope is wonderful.

What *The Gangs of New York* depicts, through its historically inaccurate congealing of the Dead Rabbits-Native American gang warfare with the Draft Riots, is the larger historical accuracy of capital’s simultaneous subjugation of the challenges of the plebeian street and the Southern plantocracy. This came about through the power of the capitalist state at the same time as it was a formative moment in the consolidation of that state.

Had Scorsese’s film made only this elementary point, it would have made a significant contribution. The Draft Riots were indeed the climax of an age, and, if the gangs were but a part of that historical moment, rather than its defining feature, they were nevertheless an articulation of critical components of class formation. The ‘muscle’ of the mean, plebeian streets and the politics of provisioning that Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall came to epitomise were a Faustian bargain in the complex relations of industrial-capitalist America’s formative years. A good part of the rough and smooth hands that came together in an ‘alliance’ of the 1850s and 1860s ended with the Civil

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War and the consolidation of United States capital and its servile state. ‘Democracy’ was born as the gang-ordered ‘electioneering by riot’ gave way to the more orchestrated ordering of votes by political machines, which bought their purchase of the public purse with soup and jobs and secured their hegemony with the disembodied ‘votes’ of the poor. What Tweed bemoaned in the Draft Riots was not, of course, the racist wall of fire that now separated black and white workers, nor the deaths of so many on both sides of the colour line. ‘We’re burying a lot of votes down here tonight’, he moans, for, in America, votes, like time, are money. Amsterdam is left the last, sad word, the voice of class unconsciousness:

How many New Yorkers died that week we never knew. We thought there wouldn’t be no country left by the end of it. And that no matter how much blood they spilt to build the city up again, and keep on building, for the rest of time, it would again be like no one even knew that we was ever here.

Having won the ear of the political boss on the basis of his ‘traditionalist’ street muscle, the young Vallon barters effectively within capitalism’s metaphorical network of the state’s brokerage politics. He cajoles Boss Tweed, wins Monk away from the limiting loyalties of self and strength, putting him on the hustings and giving voice to ‘democratic’ possibility, in the end securing the election of a sheriff who threatens the Butcher more than he does the evolving machinery of hegemonic urban politics. Yet, for all of Amsterdam’s successful pulling of the wires of modern state-building somewhat successfully ‘from below’, he ultimately finds himself and his class on the short end of power’s historical stick.

What this suggests is that historians have perhaps been of late too quick to revere ‘republicanism’s’ rhetoric of egalitarianism, while ignoring Alan Dawley’s old suggestion that, in the United States, electoral politics ‘was the main safety valve of working-class discontent’, the ballot box a coffin of class consciousness. But something lived on in this coffin. It produced a twentieth-century New York that would simultaneously sustain a social-democratic polity and racial inequality, a vibrant and militant working class and widening gaps between rich and poor, episodic instances of labour-capital conflict and political administrations and histories of corruption and cynicism. As Amsterdam would have said: ‘it’s a funny feeling being took under the wing of a dragon. It’s warmer than you think’. The Dead Rabbits, both their ‘muscle’ and their negotiations, were gone, but they could hardly be forgotten.

28 Dawley 1976.
29 Freeman 2000.
30 Amsterdam’s comment takes us, I would argue, in different, indeed more fruitful directions than those posed by Walsh’s rejection of what he considers Scorsese’s misanthropy. Walsh wants to merely reject the backward ideology of racism and ‘mindless violence’ that he sees as the central animating forces in Scorsese’s ‘street level’ ‘reactionary and anti-intellectual distortion of history’. Walsh cites the 1840s and 1850s as a Renaissance period, in which the influence of
Class and race: a relation of proximity

Race and understandings of Americanism and whiteness are obviously central to both contemporary historiography and Scorsese’s *The Gangs of New York*.\(^3\) Many critics will no doubt find the chaotic congealments of the film suspicious. How can Bill Cutting, a nativist anti-Irish bigot, walk side-by-side with Irish Catholics such as McGloin, or cultivate a young Irish protégé, Amsterdam? Could the Dead Rabbits, an Irish Catholic street gang, have harboured blacks? The particularities of a detailed factuality are perhaps, however, less important that the suggestiveness of Scorsese’s depiction of what Five Points’ life was like racially.

There is no mistaking the interracial and cross-ethnic character of the Sixth Ward, and like many similar urban districts of the United States at mid-century, racial and ethnic mixing was a norm that co-existed with varied levels of racism that cut themselves into the fabric of everyday life. This process was, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, as Fanny Kemble noted in her *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation* (1863), the more the Irish and African-American peoples were lumped together, the greater the hostility between them. On the other, as was apparent in New York and Boston, ‘mixed’ marriages often involved poor black men and poor Irish women. The Five Points was a cauldron of this ‘race mixing’, its dance halls, cock pits, hotels of assignation, sexualised streets, grog shops, and raucous theatres a venue for liaisons and cultural crossovers. Frederick Douglass regarded the Bloody Old Sixth as little more than a receptacle for ‘the filthy scum of white society’, but there is no doubt that blacks and whites mixed on more equal terms in its dark alleyways, squallid tenements, and biracial bagnios than in uptown salons, where relations between blacks and whites turned largely on the necessity of African-Americans serving their plutocratic masters. It was, not surprisingly, in the notorious Five Points that an 1844 dance contest pitted the Irish ‘Master,’ John Diamond, against the black ‘Juba,’ William Henry Lane.\(^3\)

Scorsese materialises this black-white relation and, although historians are prone to downplay crass economism in our understandings of class and race, the Butcher’s nativism/racism are constant reminders of just how critical the hierarchy of racialised wages was in the making of class. As Bill surveys the Irish descending the ships in the harbour onto the streets of republican citizenry he snorts, ‘I don’t see no Americans.

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Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Dickinson, Whitman, and Stowe was paramount. I do not dispute the significance of this ‘high’ culture and its accomplishment, but question the validity of divorcing it entirely from ‘lower’ forms of thought and cultural practice, as is surely indicated by the case of Whitman. Moreover, it is necessary to understand the class *inflections* of problematic historical processes, rather than simply rejecting them as wrong and inadequate. See Walsh 2003a.\(^3\)

On whiteness studies, both their richness and suggestiveness, as well as some problems of the field’s handling of evidence, see Arnesen 2001, with replies by James Barrett, David Brody, Barbara J. Fields, Eric Foner, Victoria C. Hattam, Adolph Reed Jr., and a rejoinder by Arnesen.\(^3\)

I see trespassers. Paddies who’ll do a job for a nickel what a nigger does for a dime and a white man used to get a quarter for – then moan about it when you treat them like niggers.’ Professing his preference to shoot ‘each and every one of them before they set foot on American soil’, Cutting acknowledges that he does not have the guns. It is as if Scorsese is forced to acknowledge that, in some instances, mere firepower cannot do the job.

And so black and white, Irish and ‘Native’, come together, their lives in the Five Points ones that find themselves invariably cheek-by-jowl. More could have been done with this in *The Gangs of New York*, of course, and the few African-Americans that appear in the film are underdeveloped as characters and as a racial presence. They are almost always at a distance, until they are the object of racist assault and killing, during the Draft Riots, when the threat of blacks rampaging through the workplaces and neighbourhoods of white immigrant New York (not unlike Barnum’s elephant, the emblematic African ‘beast’, loose in the streets of urban civilisation) is seemingly realised with sudden viciousness. Nevertheless, there are hints in Scorsese’s film of the symbiosis of black-white relations, and of the ways in which this reciprocity conditioned the nature of racism.

This is conveyed visually in a striking brothel scene, where a black prostitute is draped over Amsterdam’s slumbering shoulder as Jenny dresses the Butcher’s wounds across the table. White and black, Irish Catholic and nativist, are, in this view, literally touching. As an Irish fiddler plays, an African-American entertains the crowd with the energetic tap dance that was one of the Five Points’ cultural inventions. Bill’s analytical oratory takes us somewhere interpretively important: ‘Look at that. What is that? Rhythms of the Dark Continent tapped down and thrown into an Irish stew, and out comes an American mess. A jig doing a jig.’ This passage of racist commentary

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33 This could also be said about the representation of the Chinese in Lower Manhattan in the 1860s which, as indicated earlier, is historically inaccurate. The question that needs asking about Scorsese’s representation of the Chinese, which like a host of other historically problematic ‘imaginings’ in the film, is whether or not they distort the large ‘narrative’ of United States history or contribute to an appreciation of ‘larger’ interpretations related to issues of representation. For instance, did Scorsese succumb to the Orientalist constructedness of Asian peoples, their cultures and ways of life encased in the mysteriousness of ‘the Other’? Or, rather, was he placing them, however historically out of time, in the large historicised proximities of white-Asian relations, recognising, nevertheless, that Asian-white relations were different from black-white relations in as much as the common dialogues and overlapping histories (in terms of work and sociability) that animated African-American, white ethnic, and native-born working people in the mid-to-late nineteenth century were much less in play for whites and Asians? There is no doubt that, in presenting Amsterdam as the sole humane link among whites, blacks, and Asians, Scorsese’s film relies on Hollywoodesque conceptions of ‘the heroic’ protagonist stepping outside of history, and for this he can be criticised. But, whether he has lapsed into the racist imagery of the inscrutable Chinese or attempted to locate Chinese-white relations in plebeian Manhattan as rather more complicated by social distance than other race relations is, to my mind, somewhat open to question. On Orientalism and the social construction of Asian otherness see Said 1979, which, of course, deals with the Muslim Orient, but which is applicable to the conception and social construction of other Asian societies, including China.

34 The script in Scorsese 2002, p. 210, is not the same as the actual language of the film. I have relied here on notes taken.
is perhaps as insightful as many recent writings on whiteness and United States racism precisely because it conveys the proximities within which working-class racism was made. Unlike other nineteenth-century racisms, born of empire’s conquests of civilisations of colour, working-class racism in the United States was forged, not at a distance, but in the hearts and minds of closeness, one part of which was competition, another being co-mingling, co-existence, and cultural blending. Out of this would come the vehement denial of dependencies that were often articulated in intensities that explain both the violence and deeply sexualised nature of American racism. And this is precisely why the fomented racism of the immediate Draft Riots context was one part economic (the threat of job loss) and one part sexual, in which grotesque caricatures of ‘Miscegenation Balls’ ran in the Copperhead press, depicting Lincoln and other prominent Republicans dancing with caricatured African-American women. Along with jobs, blacks were widely presented as on the move to steal white men’s wives and sisters. Bill’s brief comment on the ‘race mixing’ of 1860s plebeian culture thus takes us into twentieth-century class and race relations where northern black-white sex districts, the evolution of blues and jazz, the hideous history of the lynch mob, and the sexualisation of racist legal attacks like that fomented on the Scottsboro Boys come together.35

**Masculinising class and the gendered obliteration of women**

The one area where there is little to defend in *The Gangs of New York* relates to women. It is simply not possible to say much positive about Scorsese’s film in this regard. In focusing, in typical Hollywood style, on the flamboyant attractiveness of Jenny, who marches through the film as first, a tough-minded, relentlessly cynical and staunchly independent pickpocket, a former object of Bill’s honourable, but inevitably compromised, attractions, and then, second, as Amsterdam’s unconditional lover who, third, returns to her stubborn sensibilities of a personal agenda, Scorsese constructs women as the adornment of men. They are merely an appendage to the gangs, either used up and discarded (Hellcat Maggie) or forced, ultimately, to break ranks in futile escape. Jenny, to be sure, does have one of the more powerfully representative gestures of historiographical critique in the film. She traces her route to California with a hand on a map, her finger outlining the journey to the freedoms of the west, not through the continent, but around land masses, the ocean-going route moving south along the eastern seaboard, continuing down the coast of South America and around Cape Horn, and then back up the continents to San Francisco. This pilgrimage will of course be thwarted, and Jenny’s dreams end, as many did, badly. But could there be a more

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35 See, for only a suggestion of the scope of all of this, Mumford 1997; Palmer 2000; Carter 1969.
decisive repudiation of Frederick Jackson Turner’s long-influential ‘frontier thesis’, in which the lure of land and the west was said to be a safety value that siphoned off class discontents and explained the quiescence of United States labour?36

It can not be said, of course, that Scorsese is blind to gender. This, and many of his other films, present a gendered reading of their subject, for masculinity is central to all of Scorsese’s plot lines, and is most emphatically a dominant structure in The Gangs of New York. Indeed, it is too dominant because in its overzealous depiction of the gangs it manages to one-sidedly write out of the history too much, including the presence of women, and, with the ironic origin of the film in Amsterdam’s childhood memory of his father’s murder at the Butcher’s hand, children. It is almost as if Scorsese has followed a radical-feminist plot line, in which the violent power of patriarchy is unleashed in all-encompassing ways that obliterate the agency, indeed often the very presence, of women and the young.

To be sure, the Five Points was no safe haven for infants, adolescents, and females. While The Gangs of New York is notably negligent in developing women as characters and as a force in the Five Points adequately, it perhaps makes the necessarily brutal point with stark suggestiveness: family life and the possibilities for women and children in the Bloody Ould Sixth of the 1850s and 1860s was culturally claustrophobic and socially catastrophic. As Carol Groneman Pernicone’s unpublished dissertation reveals, the death rate of children in the notorious ward was a predator stalking family life relentlessly: one out of every three children in the Five Points died before the age of five, which registers in the film with the brief allusion to Jenny’s stillborn child. With Irish male labourers equally likely to succumb to the dangers of work in the manual and construction trades, women were left the small pickings of the sweated trades or the travails of the street, such as hot corn selling:

Hot Corn! Hot Corn!
Here’s your lily white hot corn.
All you that’s got money –
Poor me that’s got none –
Come buy my lily hot corn.

But such penny capitalism of the alleyways and squalid squares could easily shade over into the bartering of sexual treating that was a benign version of the occupation, if not of choice then of necessity, of many Five Points’ females: prostitution.37

The hands that built America

If Scorsese misses obvious opportunities to represent women and blacks more fully, he is also immune to the daily labours that sustained life in all of mid-nineteenth-century America, even in the Five Points. There is almost no engagement with the trades and occupations that dotted the landscape of the life of the Sixth Ward, and that gang formation was materially embedded within. Perhaps the sole exception is the portrayal of the Butcher’s technique, but this merely proves the rule of Scorsese’s disinterest in actual labour. For the Butcher’s butchering has almost nothing to do with meat as a commodity and, indeed, the only ‘cuts’ that are dispensed are given as a gift to an old ‘mother’ by the lordly, benevolent Bill. Rather, carcasses are flesh useful for demonstrating the particular knife thrusts that will result in wounds or kills. The dilapidated businesses of the Five Points, in which cigars, chairs, and combs were made, the dirty tasks of slaughtering animals, tanning hides, and brewing drink undertaken, or the back-breaking labours of those casually employed on the docks or as teamsters, hod carriers, and the like sweated out, are not even a shadowy presence in the film. Money is made through theft and the quick score of raking in bets on prize fights. The streets and alleys are scenes for standing, scoring, and squaring off in combat. ‘Work’, conceived as wage-labour, is non-existent.

This is, to be sure, a further shortcoming, but, given that the film is concerned not so much with the extraction of surplus-value and the production of goods and services, as it is with the ensemble of relations at the core of class politics and its relation to state formation, this strikes me as a shortcoming that can be lived with. The Gangs of New York is about the exchange relations of class politics in a nascent capitalist order rather than the productive relations of a capitalist economy. Scorsese is nevertheless unambiguous and adamant that his film is about the hands that built America, in as much as the machinery of politics, republican order, and democratic ‘governance’ are reflections of capitalist enterprise and its class relations and creations of that layered materiality. Indeed, the symbolism of hands is everywhere throughout the film, from its opening to its close, and the parade of panoramic, historical shots of the built New York skylines are flashed at the viewer with U-2’s ‘The Hands That Built America’ rounding off the film’s musical score. If, unlike Brecht, Scorsese is unconcerned with the actual erection of towers, the hauling of stone, and the forging of materials, The Gangs of New York never loses sight of the varied hands that held knives and brickbats, that passed the stained blade from generation to generation, that bloodied rivals, that stuffed ballot boxes, that lynched blacks and clasped possibilities of class and racial solidarity, such hands being the often invisible counterpart to the sinewy arms and calloused fingers of waged labour. In the contradictory wrestling that is the essence of modern history, these were indeed the plurality of hands that built, unevenly and often brutally and tragically, a United States of America in which class power was seldom far from the surface of relations that so many have bathed in obfuscation.
Scorsese, whatever his flaws, is to be applauded for presenting us with a different, and more insightful, visualisation.

It perhaps cultivates awarenesses that might take us beyond the spaces Scorsese himself inhabits, to new ground, like that envisioned by Walt Whitman, who penned lines of verse at roughly the same time that the Dead Rabbits and the Bowery Boys clashed in 1857. That ‘dreadful fight’ left much blood on many blades, with 12 dead and 37 injured. Whitman had the capacity to see differently:

I see those who in any land have died for the good cause,
The seed is spare, nevertheless the crop shall never run out,
(Mind you O foreign kings, O priests, the crop shall never run out.)

I see the blood wash’d entirely away from the axe,
Both blade and helve are clean,
They spirit no more the blood of European nobles, they clasp no more the necks of queens.

I see the headsman withdrawn and become useless,
I see the scaffold untrodden and mouldy, I see no longer any axe upon it,
I see the mighty and friendly emblem of the power of my own race, the newest, largest race.

‘Song of the Broad Axe’, 175–83.

Walt Whitman, *Chants Democratic*, II

References


It Didn’t Happen Here is an argument for ‘American exceptionalism’. Despite the subtitle, the question Lipset and Marks ask is not why socialism failed in the US, hardly an exception among the developed capitalist nations, but why no mass-based labour or social-democratic party took root in American soil. The authors open with a more-or-less classic presentation of the question as Marxists and anti-Marxists alike saw it in the early years of the twentieth century: the United States was the most developed capitalist country in the world, yet it did not have a mass socialist movement or even a labour party as did the other developed capitalist nations. There must have been something different about the US.

Lipset and Marks restate the argument made by Werner Sombart, as favourably summarised by none other than George Plekhanov, namely, the
democratic character of North American political institutions . . . the extremely favourable economic position of the North American workers compared to that of the European, and . . . a multitude of free lands which made it possible for the proletariat ‘to escape to freedom’ from capitalism. (pp. 26–7)

Although they do not mention it, this description might have fitted Canada, a country that did develop a social-democratic party, as well or better. In the US, by the time both Sombart and Plekhanov made their argument, the last of the conditions, free lands, had long passed beyond the hope of all but a few – certainly beyond the reach of the millions of immigrant workers who composed the majority of the industrial working class in the early twentieth century. The classic ‘frontier thesis’ was overruled by the corporate land grabs that followed the removal and partial extermination of the native population of the West and made possible the expansion of capitalism across the continent following the Civil War. In any case, the Homestead Act of 1862 which created the free lands did not eliminate class conflict or consciousness. As one historian put it,
On the contrary, the three decades following its passage were marked by the most bitter and widespread labour trouble that had yet been seen in the United States.\(^1\)

In fact, Lipset and Marks reject many of the classic arguments for ‘American exceptionalism’. Early white male suffrage, lack of feudal hierarchy, upward mobility, these are all dismissed or given low status. Instead, their explanation for the lack of a labour party in the US rests on four theses which compose the bulk of the book’s text and are placed mostly in the period from the 1880s through the First World War. The first is the failure of the American working class to develop large inclusive industrial or general unions in the years before the Great War that could have provided the stable mass base for such a party. Obviously, the lack of such unions does go a long way to account for the failure of the attempts to form a labour party that did occur in this period. Their particular explanation of this rests solely on the exclusive craft nature of the organisations of the American Federation of Labor, which is contrasted with the general unionism in Britain and Australia in those years (pp. 85–97). The second thesis is a Weberian cultural-determinist argument that the American working class was too deeply imbued with both individualism and antistatism to embrace socialism (pp. 97–100, 265–8). The last two arguments concern the ethnic fragmentation of the working class and the alleged sectarianism of the Socialist Party of that era (pp. 125–66, 167–202).

Lipset and Marks present a mass of interesting, if sometimes self-contradictory, material on the impact of immigration and the politics and problems of the Socialist Party. The authors, however, do not provide any clear analytical framework in which all this information and argumentation can be embedded. There is no notion that the development of capitalism in North America might have a bearing on how things unfolded. Working-class subculture is assumed to be determined by the dominant ideas of society: individualism and antistatism. The ideas of American workers in the nineteenth century are not placed in the context of the larger republican and radical ideas shared across the Atlantic economy of the first half of the nineteenth century. In addition, those ideas are assumed to remain static in spite of the earth-shaking changes in the size, composition, and economy of the country. Despite the emphasis on immigrant workers and ethnic conflict, there is no sense that the workers from abroad had any impact on working-class culture or institutions in the US. Most of all, there is no recognition of the impact that capitalist development in the US, which was different from that in England or the rest of Europe in important ways, had on the class consciousness and the ability of workers in the US to develop organisations sufficient to the task of creating even the sort of reformist party Lipset and Marks

favour. Largely because of this, the authors miss the central dividing line in class formation in America, that of race, which they treat as just another ethnic division.

There are at least two things that stand out as unique in the development of capitalism and class formation in the part of North America that would become the United States. The first was the existence of slavery within the same territory. To be sure, as Eric Williams argued long ago and Robin Blackburn more recently demonstrated, the trade and profits generated by slavery in the Western Hemisphere fed the rise of capitalism in England.²

Similarly, the ill-gotten gains of slavery entered the circuits of capital in the US through the great merchants of New York and Boston who also dominated the financial markets for much of the nineteenth century. The geographic separation of ownership and production and personnel, however, meant that slavery had little direct effect on class formation in Britain. In what became the United States, the coexistence of racial slavery and white ‘free labour’ was a defining ‘racial’ fact in class formation whose implications are still central.

This coexistence of two distinct forms of labour had at least two critical implications for the development of capitalism in the US, in addition to the obvious oppression of the African-American population. First is the economic, social, and cultural backwardness it imposed on the Southern half of the US – a reality that could not help but affect the overall culture as well as prevent the development of an industrial working class in the South. As ‘improvement’ was almost impossible, even agricultural development was retarded. This deeply influenced the politics of the entire country as well as the course of capital accumulation. Since both slavery and the racial peonage faced by African-Americans after the Civil War subsidised the mass production of agricultural staples, above all cotton, their persistence perpetuated backwardness in a huge part of the country and influenced the direction of capital accumulation in the West rather than South in the post-Civil-War era. The defeat of Reconstruction tied the vast majority of recently emancipated African-Americans to the land and impeded the development of industry in most of the region for almost another century. This reality would keep black and white labour separate for decades in all but a handful of places. It also meant the unique subordination of the black population through their labour and a complex system of laws and norms that undermined such democracy as there was. Second, it meant that, from the beginning, wage-labour was understood as white labour, not only by observers or employers, but by workers of European descent themselves. In short, the social construction of race went hand in hand with the formation of classes. Here was the material basis of racism that dug such deep and enduring roots in the US and influenced the development of working-class

organisation well into the twentieth century. This, as I will argue later, had a material impact on the development of unions in the period under consideration – an impact that helped derail the possibility of industrial unions and a mass labour party far more than ethnic conflict among workers of European origin.

The second unique character of capitalist development in the US was the rapidity and geographical scope of the expansion of capitalist production westward following the Civil War. Mass agricultural production on a backward basis prevented the ‘normal’ spread of capitalist social relations into the southern half of the nation throughout the nineteenth century. Thus, the sort of more even infrastructural, urban, and agricultural development that characterised English capitalism was thwarted. Instead, far-flung geographical expansion westward was to be the pattern after the Civil War. David Montgomery describes how, beginning in the 1860s, two new industrial regions and population concentrations developed: one reaching from Buffalo to Chicago and Milwaukee along the Great Lakes; the other moving from Pittsburgh down the Ohio River Valley to Louisville, Kentucky. The two strings of new cities, railroads, mines, mills, and factories represented leaps of 500 miles or more each in less than a decade. The meeting of the two at St. Louis on the Mississippi River added another 250 miles or so.3

In the following three decades, these sections would draw in millions of immigrant workers as well as old-stock Americans who had fallen victim to the modernisation of Northern agriculture as industry grew on a massive scale.

Only a decade or so after this development, capitalism took another leap of over a thousand miles westward with the rapid rise of a two hundred mile-wide strip of mine and mill cities and towns in the mountain states that ran from the Canadian to the Mexican border, itself a stretch of two thousand miles. Historian Melvin Dubofsky describes what this looked like in the West:

The industrial cities of the mining West represented in microcosm the emerging conditions of life in urbanized, industrial America rather than the simpler social arrangements of the passing frontier. These mill and smelter towns, with their shoddy company houses and stores, their saloons, and their working class populations, bore a distinct resemblance to their Eastern industrial counterparts, with this additional difference: In the West the very rapidity of economic growth brought greater unrest, conflict, violence, and radicalism.4

This temporally concentrated but spatially vast development of industry was not based on a pre-existing, formerly rural population accumulated over decades, but on

a perpetual labour shortage that drew, as Montgomery points out, from the rural ‘periphery’ of North America, Europe, and Asia.\(^5\)

Far from providing the ‘escape’ from capitalism Plekhanov had envisioned, accumulation on this vast geographical tableau drew millions directly from rural life (mostly from far away) into industrial wage slavery on a scale previously unknown. To these dimensions of American capitalist development must be added the rapid rise toward the turn of the century of the giant corporation, the almost constant change in the organisation and technology of work, and the emergence of an activist American state dedicated to capitalist expansion that really did not exist before the Civil War.

Another way to put this is that America was a dramatic example of combined and uneven development. The backward weight of the South, the rise of huge state-of-the-art industries around cities still under construction, the launching of mining and smelting towns in barely settled mountain areas, and a working population of recent ‘peasant’ origin produced a nation in rapid transition, but deeply uneven in its ‘modernity’. The notion shared by Plekhanov and other Marxists of that era that the US represented the most developed or ‘advanced’ capitalism was, in a certain sense, wrong. To be sure, the US was the biggest industrial nation, it possessed modern mills, factories, and complex business organisations on a scale that surpassed most of Europe. But all of this rested, for most of the time prior to the First World War, on a transient labouring population only recently removed from the land and an urban infrastructure still under construction west of the Ohio River. Its agriculture was divided between the highly efficient and mechanised grain production of the Midwest, small impoverished farmers spread across the West, and Southern cotton production still using eighteenth-century methods.

The result of all of this, as we know, was no melting pot. The vast waves of immigration did collide with the ‘native-born’ population and, sometimes, with one another, as Lipset and Marks emphasise, but their argument that working-class organisation required ethnic homogeneity seems misplaced. The eight-hour movement, the Knights of Labor, and even the craft unions were all mosaics of ‘native-born’, foreign-born, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish workers. The great divide remained race, not European ethnicity. The major impact of immigration was better described by historian Paul Le Blanc who writes:

> In the five decades from 1870 to 1920, wave upon wave of immigrant labor inundating industrializing America, helping to decompose and recompose the US working class in ways that disrupted and fragmented labor organisation and class consciousness . . .\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Montgomery 1989, p. 70.

\(^6\) Le Blanc 1999, p. 51.
At the same time, the heat of accumulation produced, diverted, and reproduced a broad class consciousness from the 1880s to the end of the First World War that nourished a variety of radical reformist and revolutionary anticapitalist movements and organisations. Montgomery summarises this process and how it overwhelmed whatever individualism the dominant social philosophy might have offered both immigrant and old stock workers. He writes:

Those daily experiences and visible social distinctions taught many workers that although others might wield social influence as individuals, workers’ only hope of securing what they wanted was through concerted action. Although personal bindings of families, migrant groups, young wage-earning women, craftsmen, strikers, voters, and rioters defined people’s loyalties in different and often conflicting ways, all attachments were rooted in the shared presumption that individualism was appropriate only for the prosperous and wellborn.\(^7\)

Lipset and Marks do not quite deny the development of class consciousness. In fact, according to some of the measures they use, such as the electoral success of the Socialist Party up the 1912, the US was running neck and neck with other English-speaking settler nations as well as with France. By other criteria they largely ignore, such as the number, size, and frequency of strikes, workers in the US was certainly ‘ahead’ of their European counterparts. The authors tend to minimise the extent of working-class radicalism, however, by emphasising measures better applied to stable organisations than movements and by dissociating its various wings from one another. Given the fluidity of these organisations and currents, their large membership turnover, and their frequent overlap – as with the Western Federation of Miners, the IWW, and Socialist Party, for example – this misses the breadth of the radicalisation fostered by America’s footloose capitalism as well as the negative impact it had on stable organisation.

A corollary to the instability of this working class in formation, of course, was the nature of the American capitalist class that emerged after the Civil War. It was to a considerable extent new. It lacked the gentility and sense of social responsibility evident in much of the older Eastern seaboard establishment, much less that of the European ruling classes. These were the ‘Robber Barons’, the railroad magnates, the speculators, and financiers who constructed overnight industrial empires frequently by destroying one another. Their ruthlessness was magnified in their relations with the new workforce they helped bring into being and contributed to the intensity and violence of labour relations in that era. In all of this, these new business rulers contributed not only to their own class consciousness, but to that of the armies of

\(^7\) Montgomery 1989, p. 2.
workers they assembled, exploited, fought, dispersed, and reassembled from the 1860s through the First World War.

Equally important was the role of this new business ‘titans’ in irreversibly altering politics in the US and erecting some of the barriers that made the development of organised working-class politics more difficult. They transformed the Republican Party from one concerned with political equality and ‘free labour’, if not always unions, before and during the Civil War and Reconstruction, to one focused on a fast-track business expansion that abandoned the black population of the South, rode roughshod over the remaining Indian nations of the West, and pointed overseas toward America’s role as an imperial power. Despite their laissez-faire rhetoric, they crafted giant corporations and pushed the development of the national state into one decisively able to carry out such an expansion – and to put down labour rebellions. By funding both major parties, they contributed to the solidification of the two-party system. This arriviste section of the ruling class was, in short, a central part of what made America different.

These business leaders sought to make their social-Darwinist philosophy that of the nation as a whole and to present themselves as model citizens. Self-conscious of their lack of culture and abundance of wealth, they funded museums, opera houses, libraries, and architectural innovations such as the ‘skyscrapers’ that gave shape to the young cities of the Midwest and West. But neither their rugged individualism nor their philanthropy won them the approval of the working class or even of the many middle-class reformers of the period. Ironically, they probably did more to push workers into collectivist movements and organisations than well-known leaders like Eugene V. Debs, ‘Big Bill’ Haywood, or Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

Perhaps because they examine only one side of the social equation, Lipset and Marks do not say much about the negative reaction of so many to the new business élite. Their measures of working-class consciousness remain centred around the trade-union and political organisations of that era. Through this prism, the authors identify two turning points in this period which, in their view, spelled the doom of socialist or labour party possibilities in the US. The first, about which they say very little, was the collapse of the Knights of Labor by the 1890s. The second was the demise of the Socialist Party, which they date from 1916 on. This they examine in considerable detail.

The importance of the decline of the Knights was that they represented the potential equivalent of the ‘New Unionism’ in Britain, the roots of the stable mass unions that made the Labour Party successful in that country. The authors attribute the lack of an industrial-union movement after the Knights to the exclusionary craft unionism of the AFL. As far as it goes, this is right, but it misses the deeper reason why attempts at inclusive forms of the unionism mostly failed in this period. The few stable industrial unions of the era, the unions of coal miners, garment workers, dock workers, etc. succeeded because of the geographical stability of those industries and the relatively
small size of the employers they faced. On the other hand, both the craft unions in steel and metal manufacturing, the Amalgamated Steel and Iron Workers and the Machinists, were thwarted in their attempts to include more and more grades of workers by the enormous size and power of the new corporations and the high worker turnover then common to the newer industries. Similarly, the industrial Western Federation of Miners, the founding core of the IWW, was constantly defeated by corporations that could bring in federal troops despite highly impressive multi-ethnic solidarity sometimes in the form of mass military engagement.8

Something else in this picture of capitalist development in the US worked to the advantage of the craft unions. The secret behind the triumph of ‘pure-and-simple’ craft unionism in this period lay in the protection afforded the unions of building trades and local transport workers in the growing urban labour markets of the period. Despite the frequent recessions that disrupted much industrial employment, construction and urban development experienced unbroken growth as capitalism filled in the new cities of the Midwest and West. The number of construction workers outstripped all others in this era growing from 795,000 in 1870 to 2.7 million in 1910.9 The twelve or so craft unions that rested on this growth provided the backbone for the AFL and for Samuel Gompers’ business-unionist wing of the Federation.

The other side of this coin was the constant movement of much of the class from one workplace to another and one city to another. As Montgomery puts it, ‘... the rates of labor turnover and geographical mobility were notoriously high.’10 The transient boarding house was as typical of working-class housing in those years as the shanty and tenement. Even the growth of union membership figures after 1900 conceals a great deal of turnover, particularly among less skilled workers – those who would have made up the base of stable industrial or general unions. In other words, while Lipset and Marks are right to point to the lack of mass-based inclusive unions as a major reason why a labour party did not take root in this era, particularly given the barriers of the two-party system well in place by that time, they fail to note that the deck was severely stacked in favour of craft unions rooted in expanding local labour markets and against industrial organisation by workers constantly on the move, frequently thrown into unemployment, and facing corporations whose wealth and power was growing rapidly.

The major political vehicle for worker radicalism after 1900 was the Socialist Party. Lipset and Marks note that its growth up to 1912, when its membership peaked and it got its biggest pre-War vote, was based largely on ‘native-born’ Americans – thus contradicting their own notion that old-stock America workers were too individualist

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8 Dubofsky 2000, pp. 21–32.
9 Montgomery 1989, p. 50.
10 Montgomery 1995, p. 158.
and antistatist to embrace socialism. The decline of Socialist votes in the presidential election of 1916, which is the authors’ second turning point, leads them to argue that it was Socialist opposition to US entry into the war in Europe that was behind a loss of members by the SP after 1912 and the decline of its electoral support. Weinstein, Shannon, Montgomery, and others have argued otherwise.¹¹

For one thing, the vote for state and local Socialist candidates in 1917 after US entry into the war soared, indicating strong support for its anti-war position. Running Debs for president from prison, the SP got its largest vote ever in 1920. While the SP did lose some members as a result of its anti-war position, the real reason for the Party’s decline was that it went through a series of debilitating splits. The first was in 1913, when many syndicalists left after the expulsion of ‘Big Bill’ Haywood from the national executive committee for advocating sabotage.¹² This would explain the loss of many ‘native-born’ members.

The final demise of the Socialist Party as the central organisation of worker radicalism, however, came in 1918–19 in a three-way split. The first was the split from the SP that led to the formation of the Communist Party.¹³ The second split was less formal and involved the loss of members and voters to the infant labour-party movement that arose after the War. Lipset and Marks see these splits as a sign of the SP’s sectarianism, but the Communist scission reflected a worldwide rift in the workers’ movement related to the Russian Revolution. The exodus into the labour-party movement was anything but a sign of sectarianism on the part of those who left. Most importantly, the authors’ focus on the SP prevents them from seeing the actual breath of support for radical class politics that survived into the early 1920s.

Lipset and Marks see syndicalism as the basic American labour ideology. To them, this meant a rejection of political action that was the inheritance of the antistatism supposedly unique to American workers. The number of reasons why this is wrong are too many to fit in this review, but I will tackle some. First, it is simply untrue, as they imply over and over, that US unions rejected any politics that went beyond neutralising the state in labour relations. The common political programme of American workers and virtually all their organisations after the Civil War was co-operation supported by government action, the eight-hour day by legislation, and federal control of the financial system through nationally owned banks and a national currency. Whatever criticism one might have of these goals, they were both collectivist and political in nature. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, nationalisation of various industries became common coin even within the AFL.

¹² Dubofsky 2000, p. 96.
¹³ In fact, this split led, at first, to the formation of two Communist parties that were soon forced to merge by the new Communist International. See Weinstein 1967, pp. 249–54.
In fact, the thrust toward class politics began right at the end of the Civil War. The National Labor Union formed in 1865 favoured a labour party. Labour parties sprouted in the 1880s, and the famous First of May 1886 general strike for the eight-hour day was a political strike. Leon Fink describes the push into electoral politics by the Knights of Labor in the mid-1880s. He writes:

Beginning with the early spring municipal elections and symbolically sanctioned by the special General Assembly in June 1886, the Knights flexed their political muscle virtually everywhere they were established. The secondary literature and the contemporary national labour press refer to labour tickets – called variously ‘Union Labour’, ‘United Labour’, ‘Knights of Labor’, ‘Workingmen’, and ‘Independents’ – in 189 towns and cities in 34 (out of 38) states and 4 territories.14

The new AFL, as the authors themselves demonstrate, was deeply divided between its socialist and business-unionist wings, with the latter usually winning on the basis of support from the building trade unions. Their characterisation of the AFL as syndicalist (p. 98) is simply ridiculous if the term is to have any meaning. By 1900, the AFL and its affiliates were deeply involved in Democratic Party, or, alternatively Socialist Party, politics. The division was not between the politicos and the syndicalists, but between those who embraced capitalism, the ‘pure-and-simple’ unionists, and those who opposed it in one way or another: socialists, communists, syndicalists, and labour party supporters.

Revolutionary syndicalism was, in fact, a major trend in the US just before, during, and immediately after the First World War, as it was in Britain. It was aggressively opposed by Gompers and other ‘pure-and-simple’ union leaders. At its core were the direct forms of representation established in the workplace similar to and influenced by the British Shop Stewards’ Movement and the German Revolutionary Shop Stewards. This current was widespread in the AFL, while the IWW embraced an anarcho-syndicalist variant after 1913. While Lipset and Marks use this to argue for the apolitical nature of the unions of that period, it is actually evidence of a deeply anticapitalist class consciousness that spread far beyond the measures of Socialist voting. In any event, the spread of revolutionary-syndicalist ideas and practices was hardly an example of American exceptionalism since it was common in Western Europe at that time as well.

What, then, given the breadth of radical class politics and ideas in the US at the end of the First World War, prevented the formation of a new class party? Again, the reason lies not in ideology or ‘culture’, or even primarily the decline of the Socialist

14 Fink 1983, p. 113.
Party. For one thing, during most of this period, a significant part of the transient working class was not eligible to vote due to lack of citizenship, strict residency requirement in many places, and the rise of disenfranchising rules imposed by racial segregationists in the South and elite urban reformers in the North. Under these circumstances, the sort of orderly development of a class electoral strategy like that of Britain or Australia was highly unlikely before the War. Following the War, efforts to form a labour party were thwarted by the collapse of all the efforts to forge industrial unionism in the basic and mass-production industries that the War had fixed on the American landscape. Even the older established industrial unions experienced sharp declines after the war. During the War, both Socialists and syndicalists (and it was possible to be both) pushed for amalgamation of AFL craft unions and the extension of organisation to include ‘all grades’; that is, industrial unionism. Toward the end of the War, William Z. Foster, then a syndicalist inside the AFL and later a Communist leader, pulled together a coalition of unions in meatpacking in 1918 and steel in 1919 to organise on an industrial basis. These were seen as the first two steps in an all-out assault on mass production industry. Both efforts failed for two major reasons. The first was the bickering and timidity of many of the craft unions that had initially joined the campaigns. The second was their racism. The deep recession of 1920–2 delivered the coup de grâce.

One of the most important changes that took place during the First World War was the ‘Great Migration’ of African-Americans from the rural South to Northern industry. With the flood the European immigrants cut off by war and the orders from the Allied powers soaring, US corporations turned to the South and actively recruited black workers. The end points of the migration were heavily concentrated in meatpacking plants and steel mills: the two industries targeted by Foster as the breakthrough for industrial unionism. The stories of the two organising drives and the mass strikes they led to are too complex to recount here. But a major factor in the failure of both was the hostility or indifference many of the craft unions involved to these new black workers. This racism opened the door to employer manipulation. In Chicago, violence by whites against blacks exploded in the huge race riot of 1919 wrecking the packinghouse organising drive. In both meatpacking and steel, a lack of understanding of the nature of racial oppression as well as outright race prejudice contributed to the catastrophic defeats that put industrial unionism off for another decade and a half.¹⁵

The defeats in meatpacking and steel were followed by the retreat or collapse of unions in several other major industries following the biggest strike wave in US history from 1918 to 1922. Total union membership fell from just over 5 million in 1920 to 3.6

million in 1923. The AFL shrank back to its core of craft unions in all but a few industries. The building trade unions, however, actually grew during the 1920s. Irving Bernstein captured what the AFL looked like for most of that decade:

This shift in membership strength was reflected increasingly within the American Federation of Labor. Craft organizations, with their conservative outlook on both internal and general matters, came to dominate both the Executive Council and the conventions of the AFL, with an inevitable impact upon policy.  

While the effort to build a labour party lasted to 1923, its potential mass base had been eliminated. Without this, there was no hope of breaking through the two-party system on a national scale or even in most states. Ironically, the AFL did endorse, though very passively, the third-party presidential candidacy of Wisconsin Progressive Robert La Follette in 1924. Although La Follette got more votes than any previous third-party candidate, his campaign was never meant to form a permanent new party. It was, in a real sense, the last gasp of a broad labour radicalism that had no stable mass organisations and no way to perpetuate itself.

By the mid-1920s, American capitalism had taken on the basic geographical and industrial contours it would have for the next half century. Similarly, neighbourhoods of industrial workers with their distinct ethnic and/or racial character had stabilised and, for better or worse, residential patterns become more nearly fixed. The single family home and apartment building replaced the boarding house and shanty. A majority of industrial workers found long term employment, stable neighbourhoods, and, despite enduring ethnic identities and conflicts, the elements of a shared popular culture. While ethnic identities remained, more and more workers shared in the emerging commercial mass culture directed largely at the working class and enjoyed by immigrant and ‘native-born’ whites and, in some cases, blacks alike that began to take form after 1900.  

This would include commercial amusement parks; professional baseball; cinema; and music on records, the radio, and in dance halls. While the ‘colour line’ actually hardened in the 1920s in most respects, the presence of large numbers of African-Americans in industrial centres of the North ‘integrated’ the class and aided the penetration of black culture into that of the entire society. The 1920s were, after all, the ‘Jazz Age’, while the 1930s would be the ‘Swing Era’. The newly-arrived ‘peasant’ masses who had composed the majority of the working class after the turn of the century also left their impact on the culture of this class. Catholic in their majority, they reduced the weight of the pre-Civil-War Protestant culture within the working

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16 Bernstein 1966, p. 86.
class. Their tightly knit communities actually intensified the collectivism of the class. During the decade of the 1920s, most immigrants became citizens and learned English, while millions of old-stock Americans left failed farms for the city. There was much in this new arrangement that was conservatizing, but there is little doubt that it laid the basis for the success of the industrial unions by the mid-1930s.

In their own way, however, developments in the 1920s diluted class consciousness. Firstly, there was an enormous population shift from American farms to the cities. In 1920, for the first time, the census showed that a majority lived in cities and this grew throughout the decade. The growth of the urban population, which strengthened the working class numerically, also meant the growth of the Democratic Party in city after city, in some measure, to the vacuum left by the collapse of the industrial unions and the political Left at the beginning of the decade. Bernstein summarises this:

In conclusion, city workers and coal miners, their numbers growing prodigiously, began in the twenties that great migration into the Democratic Party that was to become so critical a feature of American politics in the following decade.18

Thus, when the industrial upheaval of the 1930s came, much of the working class that would flow into the new unions was already entrenched in the Democratic Party.

The socialist and communist Left did maintain a marginal presence in many industries, however, and when the industrial upsurge began its ascent, they were to be found in the leadership of many of the first strikes and organising drives that swept such diverse industries as garment, oil refining, coal mining, agriculture, and newspaper publishing in 1933. The even bigger strikes of 1934 that hit San Francisco, Minneapolis, Toledo, and the entire east coast textile industry were led by Communists, Trotskyists, socialist followers of A.J. Muste, and the socialist leader of the United Textile Workers, Francis Gorman. This trend would continue through the great 1937 General Motors sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan led by an unlikely coalition of Socialists, Trotskyists, and Communists and the scores of smaller sit-down strikes that followed.19

Yet, apart from the few cities where the Socialist Party held on to the Mayor’s office and three states where third parties held sway (but also endorsed Roosevelt in 1936), as critical as the role of these radicals was in organising the new unions, they had remarkably little impact on electoral politics.

Lipset and Marks present a fairly conventional explanation of this failure in the sectarianism of the Socialist Party, the opportunism of the Communists in their ‘Popular-Front’ phase, and what they see as the irresistible attraction of Roosevelt and the New

18 Bernstein 1966, p. 80.
Deal. It is the least interesting part of the book and ends with the conclusion that the opportunism of the Communists and the pragmatism of the CIO leaders that led them into an alliance with the Roosevelt Administration and the Democratic Party was the right course.20

They conclude that, given the failure to create a labour party, the best course for the Left was to work inside the Democratic Party. What they do not say is that this is exactly what the majority of the social-democratic and Communist Left, along with the labour leadership and countless social-movement activists, have done for over half a century – a course that can be traced down the long road from Roosevelt to Bill Clinton and Al Gore.

Far more interesting is the closing speculation by Lipset and Marks on the relative persistence of ‘American exceptionalism’ up to the present. Noting the concerted move to the political centre and neoliberal policy by most of the traditional labour, social-democratic, and Communist parties of the developed capitalist nations, they ask whether, in fact, politics and policy in the US are as exceptional as they once were. Ultimately, examining the weak and eroding American welfare state, the greater extent of poverty and income inequality, and the decline of union membership, they conclude that the difference is still significant. Nevertheless, they inadvertently raise an important question – though one they do not address directly – namely: given the enormous changes in the last decade or two in the conditions of the US working class and, indeed, those of workers everywhere, are there any prospects for the revival of class politics or socialism in the US or elsewhere?

Along with McCarthyism, the Cold War, and the purge of the Left from the CIO, the unprecedented prosperity experienced by the majority of workers in the US following the Second World War erased the remnants of radical working-class culture in a manner and to a degree not experienced in Europe or elsewhere. To be sure, those left out of the prosperity rebelled from the mid-1950s through to the mid-1970s in a series of social movements that defined US politics for a time. From the mid-1960s through to the early 1970s, there was also a rank-and-file upsurge in industry and a rapid expansion of unionism among public employees. But neither the movements nor the increase in union militancy and numbers took the form of class politics or even of a major challenge to the two-party system.

For the last thirty years, however, the postwar prosperity and many of the gains of the social movements have eroded severely. Despite the long period of economic growth from 1992 through to 1999, real wages in the US remain at or below the levels of the early 1970s. Family incomes have also slumped for the majority of working-class households even though more family members hold jobs and more people work

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20 The 1930s and 1940s will be dealt with in a subsequent review of two books written from a Marxist perspective that present a more interesting view of the period.
multiple jobs than was the case thirty years ago. Furthermore, as Wall-Street insider Stephen Roach correctly argued, the long productivity growth of the 1990s ‘has been on the back of slash-and-burn restructuring strategies that have put extraordinary pressures on the workforce’.  

While employment has grown rapidly, it has been on the basis of a sharp division between low-paying, often contingent, jobs available to working-class people, on the one hand, and high-paying jobs for professionals, managers, and ‘entrepreneurs’, on the other. Income inequality has reached new heights and now recession promises to undermine even the poorly-paid employment of hundreds of thousands.

The impact of globalisation has also awakened many American workers to class realities overlooked by so many for so long. The formation of the Labor Party in 1996, with the backing of six national unions and several other labour organisations, was one sign of this, although it has yet to run any candidates for office. The enormous sympathy shown for high-profile strikes at UPS in 1997, GM and US West in 1998, and Verizon in 2000 also revealed a change in the views of many working-class people toward open conflict. The even more dramatic events in Seattle, where thousands of trade unionists, though no top national labour leaders, joined young activists in the streets in an effort to close down the World Trade Organisation’s ministerial meeting, reflected and helped spread this new awareness. Events at the Organization of American States’ ministerial meeting in Quebec City in April 2001 followed a similar course and point in the same direction.

It is interesting, if a little peculiar, that Lipset’s and Marks’ final piece of evidence for the exceptional and, presumably, hopeless nature of class consciousness and politics in the US is that, unlike some European nations, the US has failed even to develop a viable Green Party. Published only months before the 2000 national elections, It Didn’t Happen Here could not foretell that almost 3 million people would vote for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. Nor did the authors note that, in earlier polls, some nine per cent of union members (almost 1.5 million) had considered voting for Nader. In the end, according to the polls, almost 800,000 or about 3 per cent of union household voters actually did so, in spite of the warnings from union leaders that this would throw the election to George W. Bush.

While this is hardly proof of the viability of the Greens, much less of an imminent breakthrough in class politics in the US, it does remind us that, in whatever form working people respond to the assaults on their living standards and working conditions, it is always a mistake to write off the working class – even in America.

\[21\] Moody 1997, p. 191.
\[22\] For this writer’s views on this development see Moody 2000a; and Moody 2000b.
References


Two decades ago, it appeared as if American exceptionalism had fallen out of favour as a paradigm of any particular value for understanding working-class formation in the United States. In the early 1980s, Sean Wilentz and Eric Foner turned Werner Sombart’s classic formulation ‘Why is there no socialism in the United States?’ on its head and a generation of social and labour historians followed suit, looking at the working class that was and not for the working class that a particular reading of Marx assured us should have been. But the curious thing about American exceptionalism is its almost astonishing resilience over nearly a century of labour studies, and reports of its death have been – to judge by the publication of relatively newer works that continue to engage with and in it – both premature and greatly exaggerated. If there is anything that is certain about American exceptionalism, it can only be that we cannot yet presume to cast it aside. And therein lies both the problem and the promise of these works and others in this vein. As a shrinking subset of works in labour studies continues to revolve around an exceptionalist paradigm, and an increasing number seek either to refute exceptionalism or simply ignore it altogether, it is worth asking not only whether the concept has outlived its usefulness, but whether it is also past time to take critical stock of how and why exceptionalism shaped our collective analysis and understanding of class formation in the US and other western industrial nations.

Certainly, the two works under review in this essay represent fairly recent attempts to grapple with the concept and its relevance for understanding working-class formation in the United States. Strouthous takes a critical stance, arguing that the absence of a national labour party has to be seen in the context of ultimately failed attempts by workers to create labour parties at the municipal and state levels. The Halpern and Morris collection, more inconsistently, also tends toward a critical re-evaluation of exceptionalist arguments by examining the various components that have supported that argument over time (ethnicity and race; immigration; religion; the structure of
US trade unionism; liberalism and the US political structure). If neither work succeeds in finally laying to rest American exceptionalism I would argue that that is less the fault of their efforts and more the outcome of our collective reluctance to critically examine the persistence of American exceptionalism within labour historiography. If, as Aristide Zolberg so trenchantly phrased it, the question is really ‘How Many Exceptionalisms?’ and the answer is ‘As many as there are cases under consideration’; then, surely, the real question we need to ask is whether or not exceptionalism of any stripe has any value for understanding working-class formation in the United States or any other nation.

In his contribution to the Halpern and Morris volume, Michael Zuckerman notes ‘that the subject of exceptionalism sheds little glory on those who take it up, and . . . those who take it up shed little light on the subject’ (p. 27). His chapter, ‘The Dodo and the Phoenix’, arguably sheds little new light on the topic, but the vigour with which he excoriates past architects of American exceptionalism and contemporary engagements with the exceptionalist paradigm suggests strongly that we cannot dismiss out of hand a concept that has so profoundly shaped the ways Americans – and others – have viewed this nation’s history. And although somewhat overshadowed by his own rhetorical engagement with the topic, what emerges in the end is his vitally important recognition that The notion of American exceptionalism never did depend on empirical evidence. It was from the first an ideological construction: of a fortunate minority in the New World, of yearning intellectuals in the Old’ (p. 30). If this does not ring familiar to students of an exceptionalist labour studies it is hardly surprising, since the discussion of exceptionalism and class formation simply ignores the many and varied exceptionalisms that have served to frame this nation’s history.

It may be necessary and prudent to remind students of an exceptionalist US labour history that the paradigm they have constructed to explain the absence of class consciousness and a class-conscious labour politics has troubled and tangled roots that cannot be evaded merely because Sombart framed his assertion in the context of an argument on the Left. For those who engage American exceptionalism as a component of working-class formation invariably do so in isolation from its far longer and deeply ideological history as an explanatory paradigm for the emergence, existence, and superiority of ‘America’ as a nation.3 Without acknowledging the links

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1 It is less than clear that this is the intent of the edited volume, which ranges rather widely over both pro- and anti-exceptionalist arguments, as well as including essays that seem to ignore it altogether. In some sense, however, it is precisely that range that most accurately reflects the state of the field and the source of the problem of American exceptionalism – we cannot seem to shake its power to shape the questions we ask and the answers we seek, no matter what side of the exceptionalist divide we fall on.

2 Katznelson and Zolberg (eds.) 1986, pp. 397 and 455.

3 The history of American exceptionalism is both more important and more complex than Zuckerman’s essay might lead readers to recognise. Even those of us, like myself, who reject American exceptionalism as a way of explaining the nation’s past in comparison to other nations,
between American exceptionalisms in the ways they been used to construct both a nation and a national identity, we simply have added another variant to the myriad of ways in which exceptionalism has been used to legitimise this nation as not merely ‘different’ but ‘unique’. The importance of making this connection explicit becomes readily apparent in Ira Katznelson’s essay, ‘Working Class Formation and American Exceptionalism, Yet Again’, in the Halpern and Morris volume.

In reassessing his own earlier positions on class formation, Katznelson returns to the thorny problem of American liberalism and its impact on the US working class. In a thoughtful and engaging essay, he seeks to walk that fine line between the ‘other’ American exceptionalisms, which championed liberalism as the heart of America’s unique past and (for those writing in the Cold-War era) present, and the class-oriented American exceptionalism of labour historians. From the outset he contends that:

though it is necessary to say a decisive good-bye to the most common forms of American exceptionalism, studies of the American working class stand to benefit nonetheless from an appreciation of the distinctive institutional and political context for class formation established by America’s contested but hegemonic liberalism. (p. 40)

But, in turning his critical gaze back onto the originary text of American liberalism as American exceptionalism – Louis Hartz’s The Liberal Tradition in America – Katznelson becomes entangled in the circular logic of that ‘other’ exceptionalism, because he accepts the fundamental ‘uniqueness’ of the exceptionalist argument about liberalism. In Neville Kirk’s rejoinder to Katznelson,4 ‘The Limits of Liberalism: Working-Class Formation in Britain and the United States’, Kirk cautions that, in rejecting one exceptionalist paradigm, Katznelson and others have embraced another that is equally limiting and in some ways more dangerous for not being ‘sufficiently contextualized in terms of time, place, changeover time and the social world’ (p. 109). Certainly, Kirk’s own comparative work on the US and British working classes has demonstrated empirically that neither of these two ‘exceptionalist’ working classes are what they

need to acknowledge the power of the exceptionalist framework as both an ideological construct and an historiographical one (and that in an array of fields as diverse as labour studies and international relations, to name but two). Despite Zuckerman’s harsh attack on him, Michael Kammen’s 1993 essay in the American Quarterly and his reprisal of that essay in his 1997 book In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture, do a fine job of tracing the history and the significance of American exceptionalism in its various incarnations. It is his conclusion that ‘a crucial component in the comparative analysis of cultures becomes the comparative analysis of exceptionalism as a cultural phenomenon’ (Kammen 1993, p. 33) that deserves our attention as well.

4 One of the frustrations of this volume is that the various essays simply do not engage with each other, and this despite the fact that the collection came out of a conference and series of roundtable discussions at the Institute of Historical Research in London. One of the reasons the volume seems to miss its potential is precisely this problem – that there is no coherent editorial or intellectual engagement that could unify the articles around their purportedly shared agenda of addressing American exceptionalism. Neville Kirk’s essay, for example, is based on an earlier piece by Katznelson – Katznelson 1994.
have seemed, at least insofar as the exceptionalist paradigm(s) in both national cases have limited our ability to recognise both similarities and differences, whether in liberalism or in other arenas. But this point cuts to the heart of the problem with American exceptionalism in another way as well, and one that has come increasingly under fire from critics while it remains the centre of many efforts to both prove and disprove the validity of American exceptionalism for explaining the trajectory and outcome of US class formation: the national comparison. Beginning with Sombart’s study, the underlying premise of the exceptionalist labour studies approach has been an implicit or explicit comparison between the US working class and that of other Western industrial nations. Sombart’s comparison was between the United States and Germany, where a class-conscious labour movement had emerged in the late nineteenth century. Most subsequent studies have drawn on comparisons with Germany, Great Britain, and France. Few have ventured into comparisons between the US and other nations. And that is where the Halpern and Morris volume both intrigues and in some sense disappoints.

Beginning with their introduction, which argues that the various national ‘exceptionalist discourses all point to the need to analyze cases through conscious informed comparisons, rather than in isolation against presumed “norms” of historical development’ (p. 7), they actually follow a path that includes both direct national comparisons and national studies of particular components of the American case. In fact, reading the volume, it is not always clear how the second approach systematically engages the concept of American exceptionalism that is supposed to lie at the centre of the collection. It is both curious and telling that only the four explicitly comparative articles directly engage American exceptionalism in the selection of their case studies, their rationale, analysis, and conclusions. Perhaps more to the point, it is significant that three of those articles compare the US case to two nations not usually considered in exceptionalist labour studies: Australia and South Africa. And, while the fourth article compares the US and Britain, it undermines the usual exceptionalist framework for both cases.

Robin Archer’s essay, ‘Why Is There No Labour Party? Class and Race in the United States and Australia’, takes on one of the key components of the exceptionalist paradigm – race. Of central interest is his contention that race functioned differently in the two

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5 The 1991 exchange between Ian Tyrrell and Michael McGerr in The American Historical Review was a particularly important articulation of an emerging debate over the role national comparisons have played in replicating exceptionalist arguments. As Tyrrell would have it, historical explanations that can recognise both differences and similarities. While I do not agree that national comparisons necessarily replicate exceptionalist explanations, he is correct to note that the overwhelming tendency of such projects is in that direction. George Frederickson (1995; 2000), a leading comparativist and longstanding proponent of national-level comparisons also disputes any essential connection between national comparisons and exceptionalist arguments. Still, Tyrrell’s point is well taken in light of most specifically comparative work, and the field of labour studies seems ripe for the transnationalist approach he favors.
contexts – to encourage new unions and strengthen the emerging Labour Party in Australia, but in the US to simply deepen existing nativist hostilities and divisions between new and old immigrants (who were also identified with skilled and unskilled labour). Unlike Archer, whose work underscores an exceptionalist explanation for the absence of a labour party in the United States, Peter Alexander’s ‘South African and US Labour in the Era of the Second World War: Similar Trends and Underlying Differences’, attempts a more nuanced handling of the exceptionalist argument by juxtaposing both similarities and differences. It is his emphasis on difference, rather than exceptions, that distinguishes his work, while placing it firmly in the mould of others such as Zolberg who argue that we need to understand differences on their own terms and not as part of a presumed historical trajectory somehow gone wrong. As with Archer’s study, race is clearly a central factor in Alexander’s analysis, but equally important is the role played in each case by the states and also the larger context of war in a moment of both opportunity and change for labour in each nation.

But it is only Robert Gregg’s essay, ‘Apropos Exceptionalism: Imperial Location and Comparative Histories of South Africa and the United States’, that turns us in the direction I would contend we need to go: toward an understanding of the roots of the exceptionalist paradigm itself as an ideological construction that has served national and nationalist interests.

Those who have come to see themselves as exceptions to the rules of history, the British and Americans for example, have done so when their nations reached a position of world domination and when their interpretations of history (found in Whiggish and Progressive history, Orientalism and modernization theory, to name a few) could prevail over others. More importantly, the idea of exceptionalism depends on a description of the nation that is defined by certain parameters and narratives that, however flexible and expansive, simultaneously elide or exclude others. (p. 293)

While Sombart’s query and the exceptionalist labour studies approach it spawned will undoubtedly appear to adherents (and probably even its critics) as far removed from this exceptionalist framework, we can no longer ignore their connections. If, in fact, the American working class is ‘exceptional’, then it is so based on the larger ‘exceptionalist’ framework that has defined this nation as unique among nations. For many of us, the critique of an American labour exceptionalism began with a rejection of both its teleological interpretation of class formation and its assumption that class consciousness should take a particular form of political organisation and activism or be deemed a ‘failure’. How, one might ask, can this exceptionalist narrative of failure be linked to an exceptionalist narrative of national superiority and global dominance? Because it is the very things that make the US exceptional as a nation – the absence of feudalism; the frontier; liberalism; pluralism; immigration, ethnicity, and race;
religion; (‘universal’) male suffrage – that are the basis for exceptionalist explanations of the failure of the US working class to achieve a class-conscious political engagement in the most advanced industrial capitalist nation in the world.

I want neither to ignore nor to bury American exceptionalism in any of its many guises and manifestations. However, nor do I want us to continue engaging with it – whether critically or supportively – until we recognise not only its limitations as a means of historical understanding and analysis, but also its pervasive and unrecognised links to the ways nations have constructed themselves in relation to other nations and in relation to groups (women, minorities, workers, native peoples, colonial subjects, etc.) within and outside national borders. And, I would argue, when we as labour historians write the exceptionalist history of any working class as its failure to develop along a particular path, then we support – if unconsciously and inadvertently – the power of the nation to write its exceptionalist history of success. An exceptionalist history that has erased the struggles of subjected groups for self-determination; an exceptionalist history that has ignored the illiberal underpinnings of liberalism; an exceptionalist history that obscures the relations of power that keep ruling classes and institutions in control. An exceptionalist history that takes for granted, as do exceptionalist labour historians, that the US working class failed just as industrial capitalism succeeded beyond measure, and finds in this its own justification for a nation’s exceptional success and power at home and abroad.

So, whither exceptionalism? And whither studies of national working classes? One possible answer suggested by the Strouthous volume and the remaining essays in the Halpern and Morris collection is to look more closely at the working class that was and seek to understand them on their own terms and their own turf. So, for example, in Strouthous’s comparison of efforts to develop labour parties in three American cities between 1918 and 1924, he finds a reasonably strong working-class and trade-union support for building a third party to represent the interests of labour. He asks us to look not at what ‘should’ have been, but at what was – and why those efforts ultimately failed. There is not one answer that covers the three cases, and the history he unearths is far more complicated than we might expect given the explanatory weight that has been accorded in the past to the hegemony of the AFL’s ‘pure-and-simple unionism’. In fact, what we seem to see emerging is a potentially compelling argument to be made about the intersection of local class and union politics with national organisational and union objectives. And what we clearly find is that comparative attention to local moments of opportunity and change force us to reconsider the national-level analyses that claim the US is exceptional because its working class failed to develop a national labour party.

At the same time, while Strouthous moves us into an important new direction with his research, his book disappoints. Despite his nuanced handling of the role played by the AFL, at key points he falls back on a kind of counterfactual argument: that,
had the AFL leadership been different, then the outcome (developing local and even a national labour party) would have probably been different as well. In the end, his local comparative study reopens the case on the AFL, but ultimately fails to dislodge in his own formulation the power of the national AFL leadership to determine the course of working-class politics. Arguably, Strouthous finds himself trapped in the circular logic of the very American exceptionalism he seeks to refute, and that despite his powerful insights at the local level. Most of the remaining essays in the Halpern and Morris volume fall victim to a similar kind of problem. By focusing on those aspects of the exceptionalist labour studies paradigm that have dominated the narratives of failure – particularly race, immigration, and religion – collectively, the essays do little more than deepen the underlying assumptions of exceptionalism (even where they completely ignore the concept). By turns insightful, interesting, and even provocative, they remain limited. I would argue, by the exceptionalist engagement that underpins the focus of their research.

Ultimately, those works that seek to constructively engage American exceptionalism can do so only by changing the terms of engagement. Where they fail to do so, we end up with often very insightful studies that simply cannot get us past the paradigm of failure that American labour exceptionalism has constructed. Even when the narrative seeks to excuse that failure by pointing out the array of coercive forces lined up against American workers – such as the judiciary, the state, and employers themselves – it does so by arguing what might have been. For example, some of the best recent work has included that of William Forbath and Victoria Hattam on the structure and power of the US judiciary to force workers’ compliance despite their recorded and visible defiance. Similarly, Kim Voss’s impressive work on the Knights of Labor has challenged any notion that late nineteenth-century workers were incapable of radical action, organisation, or thought, and she usefully re-orient our attention to the long-neglected role played by increasingly powerful employers’ organisations in powerfully limiting workers’ options. But, in each of these cases and others, American exceptionalism becomes an explanation in itself for the shape and the outcome of the US working class. If the burden of capitalism’s ultimate success falls somewhat less heavily on the shoulders of these workers, it is nonetheless on their shoulders that the paradigm of American exceptionalism has been built in the case of US labour studies. And that should be of concern to us all.

Let me return in the end to the place where it all began, with the power of Werner Sombart’s little treatise on socialism and the US working class. Perhaps more than most paradigms, that of American exceptionalism in labour studies has been reasonably open about its own ideological and political agenda. The connection to a particular world view in which socialism and Marxism not only mattered but would show the way to a new era of class relations and power has never been far from this version of exceptionalism. Arguably, the hostility of some exceptionalist critics of the
US working class toward its purported failure speaks more to one’s own political disappointments. Likewise, more recent exceptionalist attempts to rescue workers from their failure by pointing to the structures of power and coercion arrayed against them speak eloquently to a contemporary unease with the apparently hegemonic success of capitalist over socialist régimes. If Neville Kirk’s persuasive contention that historical materialism is still relevant to class formation (and that exceptionalism is not) has any point, it seems to me to be here – in the recognition that American exceptionalism in labour studies was born and bred within the crucible of doubt about the accuracy of a Marxist interpretation of history.

Sombart made this clear when he laid the groundwork for his study by asking a series of important and often disregarded questions:

The country representing our own future now has a basically non-Socialist working class. Does this phenomenon therefore represent our future too? Were we wrong to regard the rise of Socialism as a necessary phenomenon in the wake of capitalism? The answer to these questions demands an examination of the reasons that have led to the distinctive mode of thought of the American worker.  

In no small degree, then, the labour version of American exceptionalism was really no more than an attempt to explain away the apparent discrepancy of an American reality that seemed to defy a Marxist analysis of the development of capitalism. And it was also an attempt to understand the future of a Germany that had spawned an amazing socialist movement despite its far more limited capitalist development (at least in comparison to the US in the late nineteenth century). In the end, however, neither nation took the path that Sombart suggested would be its future. Germany ended its experiment with social democracy in the clutches of fascism and the emergence of the Third Reich. And, despite Sombart’s optimistic conclusion that

all the factors that till now have prevented the development of Socialism in the United States are about to disappear or to be converted into their opposite, with the result that in the next generation Socialism in America will very probably experience the greatest possible expansion of its appeal[,]  

the history of US labour in the past century tells quite another story.

In the final analysis, it is the failure of American exceptionalism to explain the complexities of class formation as it happened in the US that leads me back to the point made earlier: the connection between two seemingly disparate understandings

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6 Sombart 1976, p. 23.
7 Sombart 1976, p. 119.
of American exceptionalism. We need to recognise that the ways in which Western capitalist nations have produced their exceptionalist narratives have successfully erased from those histories the struggles of actors – workers, women, marginalised groups, colonial subjects – and we need to acknowledge that labour studies exceptionalism shares (even if inadvertently) this tendency as well. But, perhaps most importantly, we need to begin the search to understand the transnational historical and structural processes – of capitalism, of racism, of class formation, and so on – that have been so effectively hidden within national exceptionalist narratives of uniqueness. If there can be no larger context in which to understand how and why nations developed in particular ways, then there can be no way of explaining how capitalism or imperialism or class struggle are part of a larger set of processes and relations that transcend national boundaries. In rejecting exceptionalist explanations, one need not reject a historical-materialist analysis, as Neville Kirk has reminded us. What we need to reject is the assumption of a particular outcome against which actions are measured, judged, and found wanting. We need to challenge the ways variations of American exceptionalism have shaped the questions we ask and the histories we write. And we need to confront the ideological underpinnings of an exceptionalist approach to history – whether of class formation or of nations.

References


**Hydra’s Materialist History**

**Historical materialism: the past as unsettled prelude**

What *is* a history that is historical-materialist? On the one hand, there is no shortage of examples. We have an abundance of writing, reaching back to the founding texts: Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, for instance, or Engels’s *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. It would be difficult to leave Rosa Luxemburg’s classic study, *The Accumulation of Capital* off any list, with Lenin’s exploration of capitalism in the Russian countryside and Trotsky’s breathtaking narrative of the Russian Revolution equally meritorious. Closer to our times, the ‘chosen’ works would vary according to discipline, period, and taste. Works of historical materialism have been many and varied: G.E.M. de Ste. Croix’s *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*; much of the writing of Perry Anderson, starting with *Lineages of the Absolutist State*; the entire corpus of the British Marxist historians, beginning with Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr; studies of the slave South by Eugene D. Genovese; David Harvey’s materialist geographies such as *The Condition of Postmodernity*; Juliet Mitchell’s early attempts to bring together Marx and Freud; and the literary and aesthetic studies of Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, and Fredric Jameson. On the other hand, the implosion of Marxist theory from the 1960s to the present and, in particular, the tendency of some theoretical positionings to assert confidently and polemically that much radical writing lacks *materialist* anchor and is hence adrift in varied currents, raises the spectre of suspect flows: idealism in the spirit of the Althusserian critique; culturalism, if we were to take Richard Johnson and the Birmingham Cultural Studies cohort at its word, circa 1979; or an ill-defined economism, posited by the subjectivity-attuned governmentality theorists of the 1990s. In short, what *is* or is not a historical-materialist text is something less than a settled matter.1

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1 For broad comment on historical materialism see Cohen 1978; Thompson 1978; Hobsbawm 1972; and many of the essays in Hobsbawm 1982. This can usefully be compared to two statements on historical method, Bloch 1954; Carr 1964. For Althusserian critique, see Althusser 1970; Althusser 1970a; Althusser 1977. Johnson and the Birmingham School made a seemingly Marxist
No single review can adequately resolve this question of what a history written as historical materialism constitutes. For some, the defining feature will be one of method, for others, issues of political tone will carry considerable weight. Structure has prevailed as the traditional foundation, but agency has occupied firmer ground as the subject of study in more recent times. The basic point is that much is up for grabs – the issue, like so many, is rather more open than some are willing to concede and, depending on the subject of study, the materialist accent will inevitably lean in particular directions.

Complicating matters still further is historical materialism’s pridelful distinction as one of the few bodies of theory that associates a part of itself, as Perry Anderson has noted, with unremitting self-criticism. Like the proletarian revolutions from which it can not be disassociated, historically developed historical materialisms, in Marx’s words, ‘criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them’. All of this makes ‘naming’ the historical materialism not only difficult, but somewhat futile.

**A rigorous tradition**

Yet we must, lest we lose sight of historical materialism’s standard, flag some markers that will inevitably blow in the winds of change and revision. Any text of historical materialism is premised on the determinative boundaries of historically contextualised materiality. This means it attends, at one level or another, to political economy, relations of subordination/superordination (power) grounded in actual histories of who does what to whom and for what tangible return, and periodisation, within which modes of production, governance, and struggle are located and move. In this, historical materialism differs from so much contemporary scholarship, with its one-sided reification of discourse, representation and image, on the one hand, and undue focus on subjectivity, partiality, and the parochial, on the other, most of which elevate the arcane and obfuscate obvious social discord, the authority of the economic, and the centrality of foundational transformation. Historical materialism, and its analytic categories, can never be divorced from the broad social relations of production and exchange; nor is it possible to sever this interpretive orientation from a rigorous

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judgement of evidence, which is often, of course, read against the grain, but must be marshalled, nevertheless, with a demanding scrutiny of a weight of sources rather than a selective sentimentality that elevates interpretation on a pedestal of authorial creation. Marxists guided by historical materialism have always appreciated power’s capacity to socially construct knowledge, but they have never bowed to the ultimatism too common in our ‘postmodern Foucauldian times’, in which all knowledge is too easily reduced to nothing but social construction. Thus works of historical materialism, whatever their subject matter, reach for broad, verifiable understandings that, at one and the same time, transcend an ideology of empiricism, yet rest on empirical evidence that is both interrogated and amassed in ways that insure conceptualisation is never merely reducible to the quaint, the limited, or the intellectually fashionable.3

This, then, is a tall and difficult order. To be an historical materialist, especially in our often ahistorical and relentlessly non-materialist times, is no mean feat. As history is increasingly marketed as sanitised nostalgia and materialism assailed by a virtual Pandora’s pantheon of ever-proliferating idealist pyrotechnics, the lure away from historical materialism, even among its seeming advocates, is strong indeed.

The vantage point of vision

There is no doubt that Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker regard their excavation of the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic as a work of historical materialism, and with good reason. In giving voice to the slaves, pirates, dispossessed commoners, sailors, persecuted dissidents, and proto-industrial strikers who presented, for the powerful capitalist interests of one of globalisation’s first chapters of acquisitive individualism and unceasing predatory accumulation, a many-headed hydra of oppositional challenge, Linebaugh and Rediker resurrect an obscured history of levelling discontent. Viewed from above, this was a monstrosity aiming at nothing less than turning the universe upside down:

The world is chang’d now. All damnations
Seize on the Hydra-headed multitude,
That only gape for innovation!
O who would trust a people? (p. 64)

But Linebaugh and Rediker see things differently. ‘Our book looks from below’, the authors proclaim with confidence in their opening pages (p. 6). It is an assertive statement that raises many questions.

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3 On empiricism see Mills 1959; and, for a discussion of differentiating empiricism as ideology and an empirical idiom, Thompson 1978, pp. 63–4.
Two such primary queries are: Why would we want to visualise only from below, and is this ever even a possibility, especially if we are looking at the past as historical materialists? And, accepting, for argument’s sake, that this is indeed the vantage point our analytic gaze should issue from, do Linebaugh and Rediker actually practise what they preach?

Looking from below, of course, can be a way of declaring political identity, and in the sense that historians of the working class, the peasantry, the sans-culottes, the landed or sea-faring dispossessed, aboriginal groups driven into marginality, races reduced to slavery, small householders, or other menu peuple explore histories of the bottom portions of society, with their particular experiences of oppression and exploitation and their views of those who are oppressing and exploiting them, there is nothing inherently wrong in looking from below. That said, historians of these sectors of society below do their subject great violence if they restrict their looking only to source examinations and historical consequences emanating ‘from below’, if, indeed, there ever could be such a separatist ladder-like scaffolding of historical process. To understand, in all of its complexity, the lived experience from ‘below’, it is always necessary to grasp astutely socio-economic movements, the generation of ideas and cultural formations, and structural transformations that, however developed they came to be at the bottom of society, had a good part of their history forged ‘from above’, at the top. The early work of Eugene D. Genovese presented an example of the two-sided depth and range of historical-materialist investigation precisely because his well-researched grasp of the world the slaves made was premised on a close and sure examination of the world the slaveholders built. This is not to say that all historical-materialist writing must reconstruct society in its totality. It is to suggest that class and other structures and experiences of social station are negotiated places of being, always arraigned with and often against adversaries, the men, women, and children who make their histories doing so not entirely as they, and they alone, please.

The phrase ‘history from the bottom up’ muddied much of this inevitable reciprocal heterogeneity of historical development, within which hegemony is always forged in the crucible of arms twisting in ever-widening circles of contention. Often associated with the British Marxist historians and the practice of historical materialism, the designation of such a thing as ‘history from the bottom up’ is a populist misnomer. In their origins, the British Marxist historians contained diversities of sensibility and approach, but their formative influences, Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr, combined analytical visions that focused simultaneously on powerful élites, economic transformation and its varied consequences, class formation, and the struggles of masses of common people.

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5 Dobb 1945; Torr 1956.
E.P. Thompson, assimilated to the advocacy of ‘history from the bottom up’ by a less historically-materialist and more decidedly liberal promotion of academic social history in the 1970s, never in fact embraced this loose conception of historical method. He utilised the different, but related, term of ‘looking from below’ (as do Linebaugh and Rediker), but he did so rarely and carefully, most emphatically in a work that was itself as much an examination of the ‘top’ of society (the eighteenth-century landed Whigs) as it was of the bottom (the poaching Blacks of the Windsor forests). Thompson was uncomfortable, in general, with any historical research that positioned its vision in such a way as to obscure the reciprocal making of class antagonists. So were his co-workers in the fields of historical materialism. Hobsbawm, Hill, Kiernan, Dorothy Thompson – indeed, virtually all of the British Marxists – looked both from above and from below, their emphases differing depending on their subject of study, be it radical ideas, capital and industry, imperialism, Shakespeare, working-class mobilisation, women and radicalism, or the monarchy.

To state, then, as do Linebaugh and Rediker, that they look from below, proclaims a political perspective, but also perhaps signals a problematic slippage in conception of method. Ironically, this problem would disappear if The Many-Headed Hydra’s aggressive articulation of where it looks were more rhetorical than real, and not actually practised. Or, alternatively, the problem would be compounded were Linebaugh and Rediker to complicate matters further by asserting that they look from below at the same time that they attend too uncritically to the perhaps less than reliable, ideologically distorted, vision from above to construct what they claim is a bottom-up view. What we have, then, in aprefacing statement on ‘looking from below’, is a political articulation of authorial position, a vantage point of perspective, a method – all of which need intellectual and political wrestling with in order to determine meaning.

In the end, the final question is how the authors handle their material: is their book a success, is it rendered problematic by a double vision that manages to blur historical reality by accepting too easily the currency of debased ruling-class coin, without having access to any reasonable exchange medium of the dispossessed, or, rather, is it mixed in its accomplishments? In this review, I suggest the latter, appreciating what Linebaugh and Rediker have done, challenging some of their evidence and their reading of it, and acknowledging the imaginative creation they have delivered. Ultimately, The Many-Headed Hydra confronts a fundamental problem of ‘seeing from below’ in general, where sources are seldom generated transparently, and of creating

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6 Thompson 1975, p. 16, where the word ‘below’ is purposefully placed in inverted quotation marks. An early essay by Thompson, titled ‘History from Below’ appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, but it is useful to note, as Dorothy Thompson records, that the title ‘was given to the piece by the editor, became the common term for the sort of history Edward wrote, but it was one about which he had doubts, since he always resisted any kind of history which neglected the structures of power in society’. ‘History from Below’ is reprinted in Thompson 2001, pp. 481–9, with Dorothy Thompson’s comments on p. x.
materialist histories of the bottom, which demand an assessment of multiple, rather than singular, social layers and their influence. The issue is always one, at least in part, of evidence: Is it there? Where does it come from and why? Is it being read adequately? Is it passed to us formed in ways that compromise our capacity to utilise it to speak to histories seen from below but often framed from above? Are there other events undermining a particular perspective? A close look at *The Many-Headed Hydra* thus sheds considerable light on just how difficult it is to probe materially the history of the dispossessed. To look from below is no simple, or simplifying, matter, and this is especially the case when the canvas of study stretches across centuries and continents, as it does with Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s book, rather than decades, discrete locales, and particular pieces of legislation, as it did with Thompson’s *Whigs and Hunters*.

**Looking below from above: ruling authority, the birth of the hydra, and the reign of terror**

Indeed, one contradiction inherent in *The Many-Headed Hydra*’s proclaimed address from below is that it is from above that Linebaugh and Rediker begin and where, it must be said, they often remain. They commence with the robust fears of the classically-educated architects of the Atlantic economy, who understood themselves in terms of Greek and Roman mythology to be engaged in the Herculean task of building civilisation itself, premised on state formation, extension of empire, and the transforming power of capital. Against them and their progressive mission stood the many-headed venomous hydra of the disorderly lower ranks, from whom emanated all manner of resistances to things proprietary. The Hercules myth saw heroic development conquer backward fugitives of misrule. Linebaugh and Rediker orchestrate their understanding of the polarised Atlantic revolutionary world, as a creation of capital vs. a possibility of alternative visions and struggles waged from below, by the ranks of the exploited, along the axis of this Hercules/Hydra myth, constructed from above. They look to ruling-class phobia for their inspirational grasp of the dialectic of defeat: they designate a central environment, the appropriated ‘commons’ (already lost), glimpsing in the terror of empire’s eye the potential of a roving global band of commoners, composed of all manner of masterless men and women, from ‘Ethiopian’ woman servants to highwaymen of the seas. From this ‘hydarchy’ emerged a ‘volatile, serpentine tradition of . . . radicalism’ impossible to suppress, ‘slithering quietly belowdecks, across the docks, and onto the shore, biding its time, then rearing its heads unexpectedly in mutinies, strikes, riots, urban insurrections, slave revolts, and revolutions.’ (p. 173).

This is the subject of Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s research, a look at the underside of the Atlantic of empire and exchange that depends, curiously, on a vision from above, one that sees only darkly, through the distorting exaggerations of eyes narrowed in fear and loathing.
The study moves chronologically, from the early seventeenth century to the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, a period of revolution, Jacobinism, and abolitionist struggle, an approach that connects England and America, France and Haiti, Gambia and Belize. Linebaugh and Rediker opt for the presentation of detailed instances of the hydra’s historical presence, which are then used as springboards for discussion of more wide-ranging generalities. The wreck of the *Sea-Venture* off the coast of Bermuda in 1609 opens into an account of commoner attempts to build various paradises in the New World, something the officers of the Virginia Company could not tolerate. Such acts of rebellious recreation were paralleled by regional Tudor uprisings in Old England, from the Cornish Rising of 1497 to the Southwark Riots of the 1590s or the Midlands Revolt of 1607. What with propertyless men and women of plebeian will in motion in Old Worlds and New, their alternative vision confirmed in practices of mutiny, desertion, and free cohabitation with native peoples in the mainland Americas and ideals of worlds without work and laws, private property and magistrates, the hydra’s head did indeed seem always rearing. Linebaugh and Rediker, more than any other historians of this period in the protracted transition to capitalism as a world system paced by the predatory extraction of surplus, chronicle the many and varied rebellions and resistances of common people. As a many-headed hydra, this opposition from underneath the sanctimonious superiorities and privileged accumulations of aristocracies, merchants, and bourgeoisies, was indeed a terrifying prospect for those above.

To sever and suppress it required a resolute class discipline, ordered in legal codifications such as the 1609 treatise, *Laws Divine, Moral, and Martial*, a gruesome tract that met resistance with all manner of punishments, promising whippings, galley service and death, twenty-five of its thirty-seven articles prescribing capital punishment. Linebaugh and Rediker present the seventeenth century as the making of class on a global scale, the social formation of an emerging world economy decisively dependent upon hewers of wood and drawers of water. This new world order was driven by insatiable appetites – for money, for land, and above all for labour. The three accumulative needs were not unconnected: divorcing the people from the land was the original, primitive act from which labour-power could be secured, out of which money could be wrung as surplus. Capital was born in this moment of expropriation and exploitation. But it could only be nurtured by terror, which spread from metropolitan centre to the world hinterlands, where commodities and chattels were harvested in brutalising environments, the interpretive high priest of which, according to Linebaugh and Rediker, was none other than the ‘wise man’ of the scientific revolution, Francis Bacon. They see in his writings such as *The New Atlantis* (1627) a ruling-class conceptualisation of monstrosity tending toward a theory of genocide, one that blended skin colours in the homogenising hue of class. ‘By 1617’, Linebaugh and Rediker claim,
ruling-class policy was to ship the expropriated to far flung labor markets, and various slave trades grew up to accommodate and extend the policy. Thus began what in a later day would be called the middle passage. Terror was instrumental; indeed, it was a mechanism of the labor market for the hewers and drawers. They had become deracinated. (p. 60)

The gestation of ‘commonism’: Putney’s proleration

To illustrate the case, and to move inside the alternative vision of the hydra, Linebaugh and Rediker strike creatively on the person of Francis, a West Indian ‘Blackymore maide’. A servant woman whose Bristol master was located on wharves that put Francis in daily contact with the varied exchanges of the triangular trade, she heard the words and accents of the North Atlantic (Gaelic, African, American, West Indian, Dutch) and saw its traffic in dark-skinned men, women, and children. The sources are thin, but Linebaugh and Rediker see through their tissue-like transparency a vision from below, evident to them in Francis’s Anabaptism. There, they discern an incendiary antinomianism, feeding into the religious radicalism of the defeated New Model Army and Oliver Cromwell’s campaign of the 1640s. This leads them to focus on the significance of the Putney Debates, defined, they insist, by ‘commonism’ and slavery, and marking the high point of revolutionary possibility in the seventeenth century. They perhaps read the Debates too one-sidedly, sidestepping the dialogue over the meaning of property in an embrace of the most radical positions coming out of the 1640s, which they then attribute influence to in the evolution of ‘commonism’. From Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, the path of the hydra leads Linebaugh and Rediker to a series of 1649–52 events in Ireland, Barbados, and West Africa, all of which confirm for them the ways in which ‘the everlasting gospel’ spread its worldly alternative: ‘the struggle against slavery, the struggle for the commons’ (p. 142).

Linebaugh and Rediker thus see an army of redressers, reaching across continents and through the ages of maritime capital’s traversing hoarding of wealth, property, and power. The languages and perspectives of this ‘motley crew’ were joined, according to The Many-Headed Hydra, at points of discipline (enclosure, prison, factory, and hangman’s noose), exchange (sea-borne ship and tavern), and upheaval (revolt, mutiny, conspiracy, seizure, abolitionist jubilee). This latter agency of resistance is central to the study, and appears as relentless as it was routinely and viciously suppressed. When, in 1816, twenty-four English commoners were sentenced for protesting against enclosures and the high price of bread, the assizes at which their fate was sealed

7 While Hill 1972 provides ample example of the existence of radical, anti-property ideas in the 1640s, a close reading of the account of the Putney Debates in its pages confirms more of a dialogue around property than Linebaugh and Rediker acknowledge.
echoed with the lyric of Handel’s *Air*: ‘Why do the heathen so furiously rage together?’ (p. 315).

Linebaugh and Rediker are not so much empirically or theoretically engaged with this question. Instead, they assume collective rage as central to historical process, a just war waged by the have-nots against the haves. There are times when the two authors, clearly committed to a view of the downtrodden people as inherently rebellious, overreach themselves, likening an impulse of resistance, imprecise and lacking in focus, to a revolutionary upheaval of decided determination.

Thus, a 1741 New York conspiracy, lasting two weeks and involving a few hundred disaffected elements of the Linebaugh-Rediker ‘motley crew’ is equated in its unsuccessful efforts to incite an urban insurrection, to the truly awe-inspiring Neapolitan uprising of the fisherman Massaniello in 1647. The latter revolt drew into its ranks an eventual army of 150,000, actually seized power in the name of the poor, seating a bare-footed mariners’ capped commoner on the throne of one of the largest cities in the world. Naples was turned upside down: prison doors were flung open to free the incarcerated; tax records were burned; nobles were forbidden to wear expensive garments; the properties of the rich were seized, and opulent furnishings burned in the streets; the price of bread was brought down and placed under controls; it was rumoured that those who would champion monarchy in the midst of the Massaniello revolt stood in the shadow of the gallows. That ruling authority trembled at the potential global reach of the Naples uprising, which it saw circulating from the shores of the Mediterranean through England’s Putney Debates, occurring at the same time, is one thing – a 1650 literary production proclaiming: ‘The people is a beast which heads hath many/England of late shew’d this more than many.’ But, for Linebaugh and Rediker to suggest that this same impulse rocked New York City in a vague conspiratorial discontent emanating from a tavern almost a century later is, however useful the discussion of the 1741 activities, overstatement at best (pp. 114, 179).

The problem is conceptual. One analytical wheel driving this cart of characterisation is Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s reliance on the terms ‘commons’ and ‘commoners’, from which they assume an oppositional and alternative political economy of ‘commonism’, pitted against capitalism’s agendas and acts, including ‘slavery, dispossession, the destruction of the commons, poverty, wage labor, private property, and the death penalty’ (p. 140). All recalcitrance, all resistance, all rebellion – over centuries of disorientating socio-economic transformation involving continents whose social formations, political economies, and cultures were diametrically different – are lumped into this commoners’ just revolt. Too much is thus placed indiscriminately in an interpretive container that is being asked to hold far more than it can reasonably be expected to envelop, both politically and intellectually. The result is: overdrawn comparisons, selection and elaboration of instances that seem exaggerated in importance and significance, and a somewhat cavalier handling of the important matter of historical
periodisation and context. This is at the heart of a rather mean-spirited critique of *The Many-Headed Hydra* by David Brion Davis in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* (NYRB), where the text is parodied as itself a parody – ‘of highly romanticized Marxism’. But what Davis does not know about Marxism, romantic or otherwise, would fill more than an article in the NYRB, just as his Cold-War-style equation of small-c communism and the Thousand Year Reich speaks legions about a politics of nasty conflation.\(^8\)

**The condescension of the commons**

Central to Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s task is what they conceive of as the Thompsonesque art of rescuing historical losers from the enormous condescension of posterity. The violence of the defeats that have left History’s dispossessed largely invisible is, for the authors of *The Many-Headed Hydra*, a consequence of a dual process, registered in past and present. On the one hand, the brutality of power’s coercions has long suppressed the very presence of the poor, the producers, and protest, and perhaps at no point more decisively than in that period of the Atlantic Revolution’s making of an international order of exchange. At the material base of this long historical process, too often conceived as a netherworld of capitalism’s prehistory, exists a sunken mass of intransigent humanity that Linebaugh and Rediker struggle to bring out of the dark depths into the analytical light. On the other, if History has left this mobile, multi-ethnic proletariat defeated and depressed, historians have written the powerless out of their narratives of victory by refusing to look beyond the captivating abstractions of nation-state and the circuits of capital, categories unwelcoming to understandings of the propertyless, especially those whose modes of production were in something of a perpetual, international motion. This combination of violent suppression, interpretive abstraction and confinement, and subjective instability has insured that the very history Linebaugh and Rediker want to recover is highly elusive, most emphatically when it is approached, as they insist it must be, from below.

While Thompson posed his early endeavour of rescue in terms of limitations of time and space, concentrating his historical research on the England of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a time of trouble associated with the congealed emergence of the repressive modern bourgeois state and capitalism’s Industrial Revolution, in which hand manufacture and rural domesticity was being replaced by the disciplines, market orchestrations, managerial innovations, advanced technologies, divisions of labour, concentrations of production, and emerging factory system, Linebaugh and Rediker reach across continents and centuries. Their conduit is the

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\(^8\) Davis 2001.
wind of thought and the traversing of oceans, rather than the footpaths of labour migration, although they necessarily address this as well. Their travels are exciting in their range, and the breadth of their vision from below, however much it draws on the view from above, is novel and stimulating.

The paradox of reproduction

Scintillatingly suggestive, the argument, as it repeats itself around the globe, is at times, however, rather stretched. ‘The commons’ and its plebeian, anti-proprietary (in persons or things) ‘commonism’ burst with the variety of dispossessions that Linebaugh and Rediker pour into it. The rough-edged social tensions of the emerging capitalist world and its conflictual material relations of inequality tear against the historical sensibilities that construct notions of ‘the hydra’, ‘the motley crew’, ‘the multi-ethnic proletariat’. Uniformly, these are interpreted by Linebaugh and Rediker as repositories of values and behaviours antithetical to property and slavery, chattel or wage, defiant in the face of power’s demand that ownership of men and women, the land and the seas, production and exchange, be codified. As attractive as is the Linebaugh and Rediker construction of commoner revolt and ‘commonist’ values, materialist historians familiar with their sources and their arguments will inevitably find themselves confronting evidence, should they seek to look seriously for it, that tells more complicated tales. The oppressed, not surprisingly, did not always unambiguously challenge capital and other established powers or their authorities in unequivocal refusals of all exploitations and oppressions. Indeed, they often bought into the reproduction of oppression and exploitation themselves, if opportunities presented such options. Not all below was solidarity in the revolutionary trans-Atlantic.

Pirates did not just free slaves, for instance; they also traded in them, and calculated the value of their booty or the compensations of injuries suffered in chattel bodies as well as pieces of eight (an arm lost ‘on the chase’ would take in 600 pieces of eight or six slaves). Even in the mythical commoner outpost of Madagascar’s Libertalia, a product of the fertile mind of Captain Charles Johnson, and described at length in A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates (1724), the utopian buccaneer commander, Captain Mission, said to knock the chains off slaves and make them ‘free men, and Sharers in His Fortune’ ran into an implacable ‘commonist’ refusal to extend this freedom universally. When Libertalia’s egalitarian pirate crews seized a party of 100 Muslim girls and their families en route to Mecca, Mission pleaded with his men to free the young women. His exhortations fell on deaf ears as the polygamous buccaneers demanded to keep the captured women, anything but consensual ‘partners’, as ‘wives’. The Mosquito Indians of the Nicaraguan coast, whom Linebaugh and Rediker suggest taught E.P. Thompson’s ultra-Jacobin 1802 conspirator, Colonel Edward Despard, many lessons in ‘ideas of freedom’ and possessed
a ‘seminal knowledge of the commons’ (pp. 281, 267), were similarly not averse to enslaving prisoners of war.

**Montserrat’s Irish: a complication for the commons**

If no one can doubt the capacity of the Irish to resist their reduction to a status of perpetual servitude in outposts of Empire such as Barbados, Montserrat, and Jamaica, Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s depiction of them as something of a vanguard of interracial anti-slavery, commoner revolt (pp. 120–7) bypasses significant other evidence that presents the reconstructed ‘freeborn’ Irish, especially the formerly indentured aspiring to small planter status, as among slavery’s advocates. Like the account of pirates, in which buccaneer ships are accorded the status of ‘multiracial maroon communities’ (p. 167), the ways in which the Irish dispossessed, forced to follow the sails of seventeenth-century diasporas, interacted with black Africans in the Age of Slavery is approached in new and exciting ways by Linebaugh and Rediker. No doubt there are cases aplenty of Irish-African coalition, but the enthusiasm for instances of solidarity in *The Many-Headed Hydra* could perhaps be reined in with a more judicious canvassing of other evidence and experience.

They cite, for instance, ‘the Black Irish’ of Montserrat as a regional ethnicity and clearly associate it with an alliance of indentured Irish servants and black African slaves, sealed in Caribbean plots of 1675, 1686, and 1692. Perhaps, but ethnographic evidence about the ‘Black Irish’ of Montserrat is at best ambiguous, and its major chronicler, John Messenger, has left many historians unconvinced of a truly important Irish legacy, let alone one sealed in African-Irish solidarities of the sort suggested by Linebaugh and Rediker. Indeed, one historian, Donald H. Akenson, has argued that the paucity of evidence for such a legacy is explainable in exactly opposite ways. The ‘Black Irish’, supposedly the product of eighteenth-century marriages, are overwhelmingly concentrated in Montserrat’s richer, more arable, northern land mass, where Irish Protestants and English Anglicans predominated, and where larger plantations, higher concentrations of slaves, and the galloping capitalist monoculture of sugar factories were evident. The Irish, especially the poor of indentured (and likely Catholic) background, were, in contrast, ‘settled’ in greatest concentration in the impoverished, small-holding southern ‘horseshoe’ where petty plots were given over to the production of tobacco, indigo, various provisions, and debased artisanal sugar cultivation and curing. The ‘Irish horseshoe’ was Montserrat’s ‘Corktown’: its three census districts in the late seventeenth century were between 76 and 91 per cent Irish, and it was this region of the island that was most threatening, traitorous, and turbulent.

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* For a discussion of some of this, and a citation of many relevant sources, see Palmer 2000, pp. 188, 193–5, 199.
But it was not a bastion of revolutionary ‘commonism’. Nearly 32 per cent of the small households held an adult slave or two, and, the predominance of male slaves aside, these chattels were not likely to end their days as beloved mistresses or wives. The southern Montserrat Irish were far more likely to be working the land alongside Church-sanctioned white spouses than were their more profligate seigneurial counterparts to the north. It was these ‘dominant’ and, for a variety of obvious reasons, more ‘enlightened’, Montserrat barons – some English, some Irish, and a smattering of Scots – who, again for obvious reasons (lack of a wife, availability of opportunity, accessibility, and seclusion, and possibly a variety of cultural factors), proved prone to bed slave women. This is precisely why the island’s ‘Black Irish’ never called ‘the horseshoe’ home. They were not, overwhelmingly, born to the formerly destitute Irish commoners, whose racism fitted well with their seized chance to rise from the bottom on the back of slave labour. And, as Carl and Roberta Bridenbaugh have reasonably suggested, ‘nobody could have been a more vicious taskmaster than a recently freed small planter trying desperately to get established by endeavoring to get every penny out of his investment in labor’.10

By 1680, the Irish constituted a subordinate smallholder majority of approximately 1,870 of the 2,680 white population of Montserrat. However rebellious they were (and they did indeed at times prove disloyal subjects to their powerful English rulers, even going so far as to cast their lot with the rival French in the 1660s), their antagonism to the hegemony of Protestant power never quite boiled to the point that they countenanced freeing or allying with the plantation economy’s approximately 1,000 black slaves. Had they done so, a common community could have been established on Montserrat and the sugar slavery of the Island would not have flourished over the course of the eighteenth century, when the unfree black population soared to a reputed (if often questioned) 10,000 by 1774.11

Hydra’s insight
It is thus critical to weigh alternative readings such as these when grappling with Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s arguments, which have an almost intuitive appeal to the retreating radicalisms of our time. Yet, historical materialists gain little by washing clean the stained problematics of the past. Too much carping in this direction, however, also buries much and obscures the insight and imagination of this book. The chapter on ‘the outcast nations of the earth’, for instance, revisits the New York Conspiracy of 1741 (mentioned above), which, however exaggerated in the Linebaugh and Rediker

11 Akenson 1997, especially pp. 73, 88, 111–16, 179, 185–6; Fergus 1994, pp. 22–6, 61, 81–4; Messenger 1967; 1967a; 1975.
comparison to the Naples events of 1649, convinces me – whose brief allusion to the revolt in *Cultures of Darkness* followed conventional wisdoms in understating the extent of the actual conspiracy – of the need to look deeper.¹² Most of the standard commentary on this waterfront-tavern nurtured incendiary plot of African-Americans and poor whites has skimmed the polite surface of ‘fact’ and ‘evidence’, allowing a jaundiced view of authority’s admittedly fear-driven irrationality to cloud the character of the ‘uprising’ in doubt. If Linebaugh and Rediker overstate the significance of this revolt, they offer us another perspective, in which the connective strands of the Atlantic world, seen not so much from below but through the eyes of fearful authority in an outpost of empire, worried by imperial attack from another European power and the possibility of a wider slave uprising, come together in a creative historical reconstruction of an event perhaps too easily slighted. In a way, this kind of overstatement, clearly a weakness of the book, is also its strength. In bending the analytical stick against the tautly narrow interpretive conventionality of our times, *The Many-Headed Hydra* insists on prying open a space in which the rebellious ‘commonism’ of the past, long suppressed as both act and knowledge, finally receives a hearing. In doing so, it reaches beyond empiricism through a conceptually-poised empirical idiom that demands respect at the same time as it stimulates reserve.

Whatever one’s particular reading of the strengths and weaknesses of Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s utilisation of Olaudah Equiano, Edward and Catherine Despard, or Robert Wedderburn to illuminate the meanings of the American Revolution, Jacobinism, Empire, and the Jubilee of abolitionism – these being the last chapters of the book – there is no doubt that, in terms of the hydra of revolt and opposition as it entangled issues of class, gender, and race in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, their account is a stimulating inducement to rethink the limitations of past accounts. But, as historical materialists, Linebaugh and Rediker owe their project, always one that is going to be assailed by mainstream interpretations, a thoroughgoing engagement with all evidence and argument, rather than the inclination, present in this study, of tilting interpretation in ways that accent only the positive possibility of a solidarity of the oppressed, sealed in the diffusion of revolutionary thought that is assumed rather than demonstrated to have existed.

**Historical and materialist queries**

For instance, in the discussion of ‘the motley crew’ and the American Revolution, Linebaugh and Rediker develop usefully Jessie Lemisch’s arguments about jack tars as the shock troops of a radical revolutionary contingent that pushed the
constitutionalist struggle against British domination to the left, with street mobilisations and crowd actions that challenged property and propriety.\textsuperscript{13} They take this further in their insistence that ‘the motley crew’ was multi-ethnic, and that it drew on the ideas and active revolts of the transatlantic ‘commonist’ tradition, from Putney to Tacky’s slave revolt in Jamaica in 1760. Linebaugh and Rediker then use the memoirs of the ostensible Igbo slave and sailor Olaudah Equiano to serve as an example of the vectors of revolutionary-democratic antinomianism that they understand as central to the transatlantic experience of ‘commonism’, concluding their chapter with an effusive elegance:

\begin{quote}
The theory and practice of antinomian democracy, which had been generalized around the Atlantic in the seventeenth-century diaspora, would be revived and deepened in the eighteenth. What went out in whiteface came back in blackface, to end the pause in the discussion of democratic ideas in England to give new life to worldwide revolutionary movements. What goes around, comes around, by the circular winds and currents of the Atlantic. (p. 247)
\end{quote}

Such a passage is a welcome provocation to consider anew much that we have thought ‘known’. But it also licences a great deal in its powerfully evocative prose, through which an almost poetic sensibility sidesteps issues of evidence and interpretation.

Some hard questions need asking: do Linebaugh and Rediker demonstrate convincingly that the theory and practice of antinomian democracy had indeed been generalised throughout the Atlantic world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Have they actually argued through adequately the reciprocities of white and black in this epoch of enslavement and the murderous trade in human bodies of colour, from which whites of high station and low profited (or understood themselves to profit), albeit in highly differentiated ways? What is an historical materialist to make of this almost environmentally determinist suggestion that winds and currents inevitably carry revolutionary movements and ideas? It does not help, of course, that an empirical interrogation of the veracity of Equiano’s account has now been launched, the suggestion made that his 1789 narrative, on which Linebaugh and Rediker rely, fabricates a connection to Africa and the experience of the Middle Passage.\textsuperscript{14} But this issue of an individual claim is less than pivotal: Equiano could well have constructed ‘his’ narrative as a composite ‘recollection’, an accounting drawn from sea stories and oral histories quite as valid as any personal biography.

\textsuperscript{13} Lemisch 1968; 1997; 1999.
\textsuperscript{14} Caretta 1999.
Jamaica, 1760: Tacky’s Revolt, the commons, and Africanist chiliasms of despair?

More troubling is the assumption of what needs demonstrating: the actual movement (and purchase) of ideas, evidence of tangible commitments to a ‘commonist’ culture, and organised expressions of alternative. That the sites of Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s vectors of revolutionary development, such as Tacky’s Revolt, often fit awkwardly at best within their argument of a ‘motley crew’ united in its battle against both enslavement and dispossession, is more disturbing.

Tacky’s Revolt, for example, is difficult to understand, as Linebaugh and Rediker, claim, as striking ‘the tocsin of freedom’s uprising’ within ‘the cycle of the American Revolution’, (p. 236) when many have argued, without denigrating its significance, that it represented something of a transition in the history of slave revolt. Genovese’s succinct characterization seems apt, and far more complicating, in its assessment of maroon-African, slave-British, plantocracy-revolutionary ideas relations, than Linebaugh and Rediker are prepared to allow:

The pacification of the maroons made revolt during the eighteenth century more difficult and less frequent, but not less intense: In 1760, St. Mary’s Parish exploded in a revolt of at least 400 slaves, which triggered other revolts, one of which engaged about a thousand. The maroons helped the British crush ‘Tacky’s Rebellion,’ but not before Jamaica had been shaken to its foundations by Akan slaves-turned-warriors, called to arms by obeahmen. This revolt, and those of 1765 and 1766 marked the beginning of the transition from rebellions aimed at restoring an African past to the movements to establish a revolutionary future.15

A recent historical account, on which Linebaugh and Rediker rely but do not follow, sees Tacky’s Revolt as led by African Coromantees bent, to be sure, on freedom, but not one necessarily governed by Winstanley’s understanding of the commons.

According to Michael Craton, who often cites the same eighteenth-century accounts that Linebaugh and Rediker draw upon, the Jamaican Coromantee slave uprising was ‘a classic revolt led by the fiercest of the unassimilated Africans, . . . possible only in a comparatively early stage of plantation development’. Craton echoes the West Indian Jamaican historian, Edward Long, an admittedly fearful commentator, whose hatred for the Akan slaves was patently clear in 1774 writings that claimed Tacky and his followers were intent on ‘the entire extirpation of the white inhabitants; the enslaving of all such Negroes as might refuse to join them; and the partition of the island into small principalities in the African mode; to be distributed among their leaders and head men’. This, if true, was hardly a call to the commons.

15 Genovese 1979, p. 36.
Nor, it must be said, were some of the rebel slaves’ actions: at one plantation they raped ‘the mulatto mistress’ of a slain overseer, sparing her life only when the estate’s slaves spoke kind words of her always being on their side. Linebaugh and Rediker quote a passage from Long that also appears in Craton’s book, a recounting of a captured Akan slave revolt leader’s conversation with a Jewish militia guard. They stress the African’s view that the sailors did not oppose the revolution, and would ‘bring us things from t’other side the sea, and be glad to take our goods in payment’ (p. 222). Craton reads the entire passage differently: ‘Thus, in Long’s account, the Coromantee was proposing a decolonized Jamaica and a situation very similar to that in his native West Africa; the Africans would be firmly in political control, the white Europeans would come as commercial suppliants, and the Jews (like the Portuguese tangomaos) would act as middlemen’. ‘Commonism’, clearly, is here in the eye of the beholder.16

It is possible to see in Tacky’s Revolt something different from a linkage backward to Winstanley and the Putney Debates and forward to the American Revolution. This understandable revolt, which ended in vicious repression, was an eminently materialist struggle to drive to ultimate deadly defeat an enslaving enemy and reconstitute an old, and almost certainly inegalitarian, African order. Africanisms motivated Africans.

Assailing a brutalising slave régime, the rebel chattel Tacky ordered his world view less around ideas of the commons antagonistic to property than around the outlawed Akan religion, with its belief in spirit possession, supernatural power, and the ever-present influence of the dead. How much this revolt could possibly have ‘revived and contributed to a tradition of revolutionary thought that stretched back to Winstanley and the English Revolution’ (pp. 222–3) is surely questionable given Tacky’s willingness to condemn to chattelhood all blacks who did not join unambiguously with him – unless Linebaugh and Rediker want to argue that some Levellers actually advocated enslaving Englishmen as a form of punishment, a position put forward fleetingly in the aftermath of the Putney Debates. But the implication of such qualifications compromises the notion of the commons considerably. More fruitful, perhaps, although it ventures on to highly contentious interpretive ground, given the sensitivity with which we must approach resistance to enslavement drawn out of cultures entirely foreign to contemporary Anglo-American experience, is the possibility that Tacky’s Revolt was an anguished, entirely justifiable uprising driven, in part, by a quest for freedom that drew some of its sustenance from an African-ordered ‘chiliasm of despair’.17

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17 On Leveller enslavement see Eltis 2000, pp. 15–16, quoting a Winstanley pamphlet of 1650; on ‘chiliasm of despair’ see, of course, Thompson 1963, pp. 375–400.
Hydra’s advocates: Despard, Wedderburn and Blake

Linebaugh and Rediker also insist, with no evidence to hand save that he was born in Jamaica in its aftermath, that Tacky’s Revolt ‘undoubtedly influenced’ Robert Wedderburn (p. 319). The offspring of an enslaved mother and her estate-owning, doctor slavemaster, Wedderburn became a radical Spencean and abolitionist, a crusader for the freedoms of wage and chattel slaves on both sides of the Atlantic. If Tacky’s Revolt had less of an impact on him than suggested in passing in The Many-Headed Hydra, the San Domingo Revolution of Toussaint L’Ouverture, with its motivating connections to eighteenth-century bourgeois revolution and the anti-slavery crusade, surely registered with him directly. A black Jacobin, Wedderburn makes a part of the case Linebaugh and Rediker want to establish, and strongly so.\(^\text{18}\)

Going too far, interpretively, then, is a setback in this study, but not one that repudiates its promise, for such transgression pushes us to rethink the nature of evidence and event. It brings figures such as Equiano, Despard, and Wedderburn into new focus. This could be done with less hyperbole and more nuanced appreciation of contradiction, to be sure. The account of Despard, who grew into his revolutionary stand of the late 1790s and early 1800s, out of blocked passages to military promotion and frustrated reform sensibilities in the tightening anti-radical climate assailing English Jacobins in the post-1789 years, should probably take into account his complicity with, and possible direct involvement in slavery and ruthless military discipline in Jamaica, Nicaragua, and Belize over the course of the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s. To do this, and to then address the reconfiguration of this officer and official within imperialism’s army, would be to explore change and transformation, which were irksomely messy constants in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century. But not to do this fits better with a particular view from below, in which the hydra’s advocates are seldom at odds with one another or with the revolutionary impulse of ‘the motley crew’. It almost certainly was never quite this clear-cut. Yet, that said, who can read Linebaugh’s and Rediker’s account of Despard and not concede how much more extensive and rich is our knowledge of this executed Jacobin conspirator, written about so sympathetically by E.P. Thompson in the early 1960s, now that we have a perspective from the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic?

The authors close with William Blake and the final moment of that globally transformative revolutionary Atlantic period, the 1790s. They bring together race and class as what they perceive to be the decisive solidarities of the Age of Revolution, with gender somewhat in the background. Acknowledging the subsequent separation, through nineteenth-century defeat of the multi-ethnic proletariat, of these lived experiences and sites of oppression and struggle, Linebaugh and Rediker are perhaps

\(^{18}\) Note, of course, James 1963.
overemphasising what might have been the better to galvanize what could, in our time, become.\textsuperscript{19} They insist that, in the two centuries separating Blake and ourselves, much has been lost, and many defeats suffered at the hands of capital’s rapacious project. They concede that ‘the globalizing powers have a long reach and endless patience’, but insist, nevertheless, that ‘planetary wanderers do not forget, and they are ever ready from Africa to the Caribbean to Seattle to resist slavery and restore the commons’.

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes!
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire? (p. 353)

Is this romanticism? Perhaps. But it is in the best tradition of this potentially revolutionary sensibility.\textsuperscript{20} Marx, after all, understood well capital’s capacities, not only to write its record in the annals of history in ‘blood and fire’, but also of its ability to accommodate, domesticate, and blind with a brilliant array of hegemonic incorporation. Yet his appeal, too, was constant: workers of all worlds had nothing to lose but their chains would they only unite. Historical materialism is not purely and simply a decontextualised science, a method of grasping political economy as relations of global power, a bleak accounting of ruling élites’ tight but supple hold over the masses. It is also about ‘seizing the fire’. Linebaugh and Rediker give us some flames. We can ask for more, but we should recognise that, in doing so, we must never demand less.

**Historical materialism and revolutionary movement**

As a project, historical materialism is as much political as it is analytical. It exists, as some wonderfully suggestive writings by Perry Anderson imply, at the interface of act and thought.\textsuperscript{21} In the absence of the former, an active Marxist movement of powerful influence with the potential to seize power for class ends, the latter, Marxist interpretive thought, is necessarily constrained, and at times skewed. To say this is not to argue that such work is valueless. Often, its skewing is its strength. Lacking the moorings of a revolutionary movement, which would give them the strength to speak the truth, conceptualisations and writings struggling to be historically-materialist in times of radical defeat and setback confront their climates of constraint in ways that can overstate the possible the better to revive potential struggles.

\textsuperscript{19} See, as well, Thompson 1963, p. 13: ‘Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.’

\textsuperscript{20} Löwy and Sayer 2001; Löwy 2002.

\textsuperscript{21} Anderson 1976; 1983.
Reading *The Many-Headed Hydra* may be about this kind of problem. Linebaugh and Rediker want the ‘commonism’ of the revolutionary Atlantic of centuries past to be there for the ‘commonism’ of the current global struggle. That it was not, at least to the extent that the authors claim in their generalised argument, is not to say that it was non-existent, nor to deny, as Linebaugh and Rediker suggest, that it has not been suppressed historically and historiographically. Yet, this book tells us so much that we have not known, and reaches to create an awareness of vibrant traditions of resistance long obscured, buried, and denied, that it goes a substantial way towards being a text of historical-materialist recovery. Its tragic flaw is that it wants too much, and neglects the extent to which this was, sadly, too little.

If the revolutionary movement in our time was less precarious, more robust in its capacities, not so beaten down by forces of superior and hostile strength, it would not seem so necessary to create a vision from below somewhat at odds with what had happened in the revolutionary Atlantic’s past – which did, of course, contain significant currents of alternative so brilliantly imagined and pointed to by Linebaugh and Rediker. It is perhaps the case that works of historical materialism are most likely to emerge in the shadows of the kind of relentlessly sobering revolutionary activism that needs no exaggerated past because its present is sufficiently large and powerful. This was, after all, the context of 1848, 1871, and 1917, pivotal moments that spawned original texts of historical materialism.

Our times, unfortunately, are not a period such as these. And given that, then, we can both thank Linebaugh and Rediker for what they have produced, and take our critique of their deficiencies as well as our embrace of their considerable accomplishments into the active creation of the kinds of movements that will nourish both the emancipation of humanity and advances in historical-materialist research.

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Re-Imagining US Literature and the Left

Among the critical sources for comprehension of the heritage of working-class life and experience in the United States is the imaginative literature produced by partisans of such struggles – novels, poems, and plays. Originating with Walter Rideout’s The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954 (1956), the cataloguing and chronicling of such writings has been an ongoing concern among scholars who partake of such commitments. Reference volumes from Faye M. Blake’s The Strike in the American Novel (1972) to M. Keith Booker’s The Modern American Novel of the Left: A Research Guide (1999) chart the expansion of the category from literature transparently dramatising the class struggle in realist settings to works of science fiction and detective fiction created by authors of a Marxist sensibility.

As a consequence, research and scholarship about the United States cultural Left in recent decades is apt to surface in myriad forms and under assorted rubrics. Even when the definition of ‘literary radicalism’ is confined to the one first proffered by Daniel Aaron’s Writers on the Left (1961) – novelists, poets, critics, and playwrights
drawn to socialist and communist movements – the omnipresence of the Left in mid-twentieth-century United States fiction, verse, and drama is startling. Every year, several books are published that variously treat literary developments and authors for which Marxist commitment is a notable part of the narrative, and where working-class perspectives and experiences are explored in unexpected ways.

Yet divining the full scope of the cultural Left’s achievements remains a charge for the future. Additional biographical research still needs to be accomplished, and the debate over categories, suitable critical terms, perspectives, and the range of kinships conceivable between politics and cultural practice is far from settled. The following survey of recent books implicitly and explicitly addressing aspects of the literary Left, by newcomers to the field as well as by one established veteran, may allow us to take the temperature of this region of scholarship as we end one century and begin another.

Billy Ben Smith’s critical and partly biographical study of Edward Newhouse (1911–2002) exemplifies the variety of foundational research prerequisite to any field of cultural study. Numerous explorations of literary radicalism have been published, as well as produced in dissertation form, in which the pro-Communist novels of Newhouse such as You Can’t Sleep Here (1934) and This Is Your Day (1937) are investigated. Yet no one before Smith had attempted to assemble the story of Newhouse’s life, consequential not only for understanding the arc of his writing career but also the ‘lived history’ of literary radicalism. As it turns out, although long faded from the public view (his last publication was in 1965), Newhouse was still alive when Smith, a mathematician who returned to academia after a twenty-year occupation as a computer programmer, made contact with him in 1996.

Smith recounts the tale in direct workmanlike prose, privileging an emphasis on getting the facts right and providing solid documentation over flashy theoretical buzzwords and grandiose claims for some new understanding of modern culture. What Smith has to relate significantly humanises the genre of the radical novel, enhancing our understanding of the literary contributions of ‘proletarian literature’ as well as fate of the 1930s generation of practitioners.

Born Ede Ujhazi in 1911, the future Edward Newhouse arrived in New York from Hungary with his family in 1923. Although his parents, depicted in This Is Your Day, were not radicals, other relatives in Europe had served prison sentences for revolutionary activities. Newhouse learned English quickly, especially through his study of Shakespeare, Milton, and Shelley, and experienced his first sympathy for the ‘underdog’ through his absorption in boxing and baseball.

In the late 1920s, Newhouse began contributing to the Communist Party-led magazine New Masses, and, under the influence of its editor Mike Gold, began hopping trains to travel around the United States. A charter member of the Party-led John Reed Club (although not a member of the Communist Party itself), Newhouse developed not only into a prolific contributor to the New Masses but also served on the staff of the
Daily Worker, where he wrote dialogue for a comic strip and penned a sports column.

In treating the matrix of Newhouse’s early novels, Smith effectively takes the tack of examining the ferment of debates that animated left-wing literary thought at the time, along with more recent attempts at theorisation in the past forty years. Moreover, his research into Newhouse’s life allows him to demonstrate the influence of Newhouse’s mentor Gold and Newhouse’s study of the works of Balzac, in addition to intersections between his career as a fiction writer with his activities as a left sportswriter, as well as occasional book reviewer and political essayist.

As Newhouse’s confidence in Communism went into crisis following the Moscow Trials, his alternative literary outlet, the New Yorker, became increasingly meaningful to him. Smith demonstrates that, during the Depression, there developed an odd parallel between stories promoted by the New Masses and the New Yorker; to switch from producing fiction for the former to the latter, Newhouse had only to be ‘less obvious in his messages’. Moreover, the camaraderie of the New Yorker stable of talented writers came to displace the left community once provided by the John Reed Club and New Masses. Indeed, Newhouse’s first collection of short stories, Anything Can Happen (1941), primarily from the New Yorker, was, in a certain sense, a transitional work marking the decisive shift from the Left to the mainstream. The book is characterised by Smith as ‘an episodic novel about the struggles of youth during the Great Depression’ (p. 95).

Newhouse’s fiction about World War II appeared exclusively in the New Yorker, and the decade of the 1940s was capped by his novel of political disillusionment, The Hollow of the Wave (1949). Smith, who is not himself a Marxist (but who nonetheless maintains a dispassionate tone), considers Newhouse’s fiction of the 1940s and early 1950s, when he turned to more ‘traditional, canonical themes’ (p. 141), to be the apex of his achievement. Newhouse’s final novel, The Temptation of Roger Herriott (1954), is likewise judged to be his finest artistic accomplishment.

However, this publication was but a prelude to the petering out of his writing over the next decade; only five more short stories and an autobiographical sketch appeared. The sale of several of his stories to Hollywood allowed Newhouse to make some stock-market investments with spectacular results. In the meantime, the growing fame of his wife, the noted violin teacher Dorothy DeLay, also resulted in growing financial stability.

If Smith’s meticulous research into a ‘lost’ novelist provides the necessary groundwork for comprehending the cultural Left, the more typical forms of recent scholarship focus on the ideological functions of the text, and are frequently engaged with the relationship of the radical imagination to the cultural trends of modernity, especially literary modernism. In Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature, Rachel Rubin focuses on the ‘cultural work’ performed by fictional gangsters for Jewish writers who self-consciously employ criminals as doubles and possible models for the authors
themselves – especially the Russian writer Isaac Babel and the Jewish-Americans Mike Gold, Samuel Ornitz, and Daniel Fuchs. Rubin roots this literary phenomenon in the modern era, the Jewish gangster offering a fluid identity with special attractions for pro-communist authors. Among other appeals, the figure of the criminal facilitated literary investigations of capitalism.

There are several features of such literature addressed by Rubin as examples of modernism. One is the ‘urban polyvocality’ of the gangsters’ speech, especially in Isaac Babel’s ‘Odessa Tales’. Another is the masculinity of such texts in relation to ‘the sexual politics’ of modernism, as when Gold’s *Jews Without Money* depicts criminals as positive models of Jewish masculinity, ‘crafting that role against a traditional perception of the Jewish male as feminized . . . ’ (p. 4). Then there is the intertextual and dialogic nature of the writers ‘as a multivalenced form of metacommentary . . . which is cross-continental and encompasses the high and low (ranging from the plays of Schiller to Hollywood movies)’ (p. 4).

Finally, Rubin asserts the socialist aesthetic itself as a modern experiment characterised by self-mythologising and a radical break with bourgeois cultural traditions. From the outset, Rubin affirms that a central objective is to bring writers ‘who are generally classed as “writers of the Left” . . . into the canon of modernism via their interest in the literary gangster’ (p. 4).

In effect, Rubin’s volume makes a stimulating and compelling case for the Jewish gangster as a complex trope for cultural and social transgression. Of special relevance to US left culture are Rubin’s long chapters on Mike Gold, Samuel Ornitz, and Daniel Fuchs. The chapter on Gold seems to me to be the real centre of the volume, and contains by far the outstanding study to date of *Jews Without Money* (1930). The chapters on Ornitz as well as Fuchs are also at the top of extant scholarship, although the competition is not quite so stiff in those instances.

Nevertheless, the aspect of her argument about modernism is not fully persuasive. That the novelists studied are extraordinary modern writers, and that proletarian literature emerged in the same era and demonstrated many interrelations with the avant-garde, is beyond doubt. But to take the tack that Gold, Ornitz, and Fuchs can be grasped most comprehensively as the heirs and compatriots of Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Crane, Stevens, Breton, and so forth, rather than of the realists and naturalists (London, Sinclair, Dreiser, Farrell, Anderson, Lewis) seems less convincing. Part of the problem is that Rubin never fully and directly confronts the issue of defining modernism as distinct from other trends in modern literature; the argument offered is simply that previous scholars have denied all modernist influences on left authors, which, of course, would not be a tenable viewpoint.

It appears that Rubin too readily accepts an aspect of legacy of the ‘New Criticism’ to the effect that the category of modernism is what imparts to a twentieth-century literary work the imprimatur of complexity and quality. Therefore, to defend these
books, which are clearly intricate and wonderful, she is impelled the make the case that they are ‘modernist’. Whether this approach ultimately liberates us from the tyranny of elitist critics, or gives even more power to this near-mystical category of ‘modernism’ at the cost of demeaning perfectly fine realist-naturalist writers who wanted to be accessible to more plebeian audiences, remains to be seen.

In addition, there is Rubin’s claim that the socialist aesthetic is modernist in its rupture with bourgeois society. The proposition has some plausibility in terms of the political aims of Marxism, and such politics are felicitously joined with aggressive experimentation in poets such as Muriel Rukeyser and John Wheelwright. But the record shows that most of the Marxist critics and novelists drawn to the US communist movement affirmed an explicit identification only rarely with the avant-garde. Far more frequently, and characteristically, they embraced the ‘Great Tradition’ of Shakespeare while trashing modernist authors as decadent and defeatist ‘literature of the graveyard’. In particular, after the 1935 Popular Front, the left cultural leadership abandoned its call for dualistic oppositional writing (‘proletarian’ versus ‘bourgeois’ literature); at the Second American Writers’ Congress and in the *New Masses*, the left cultural leadership presented itself as sustaining the best of the liberal tradition in letters, promoting Walt Whitman, William Dean Howells, Sinclair Lewis, and so on.

Caren Irr’s *The Suburb of Dissent: Cultural Politics in the United States and Canada During the 1930s* also addresses a number of authors and topics helpful to re-imagining the contribution of the Left. The contention of Irr’s inventive and sophisticated study is based on the view that the paradigmatic features of 1930s culture emerged from ‘local attempts [of writers] to address their peers’ (p. 1). Concomitant with this view is Irr’s appreciation of several post-World War II insights from French author Simone de Beauvoir. One is that the paradox of anti-communism is a key to United States intellectual life in the sense that the 1930s literary Left was a subculture ‘unified by certain tricks of speech and ideogemes’ (p. 2). A second is that this subculture is, in the end, not to be equated with a historical period but seen as a ‘political shorthand for Communism, socialism, or “Stalinism”’ (p. 2). Thus a cultural time period (‘the 1930s’, ‘the 1960s’) is to be correspondent with an ideology, which, in turn, is central to the definition of ‘American Culture’ in certain eras.

Methodologically, de Beauvoir is also a model for Irr in her understanding that the ‘significance of statements being made to (and about) her’ in dialogues with US intellectuals during the Cold War could be grasped only ‘when she also understood the ways in which these statements negated other unstated and opposite statements’ (p. 2). Thus Irr has devised a ‘synthetic approach’ in which she selects statements or texts, and then aspires to locate ‘the persons or positions with whom they were in dialogue during the 1930s’ (p. 3). More specifically, she asks whether the intended audience might be other leftists, a ‘more distant middlebrow’ audience, or whether the author might be ‘rallying intellectuals against journalists, or vice versa’ (p. 3).
Yet the aim of her reading of texts from ‘different locations in Leftist culture’ is ultimately to ‘emphasize the continuities of that culture across time and party factions’ (p. 3). This is significant due to her conviction that dialogues within a text ‘reformulate those taking place in the larger culture’ (p. 3). Moreover, these conversations ‘reveal the contestable nature of categories that may appear fixed’ and monovocal from a later perspective, as in the case of anti-Stalinists who appear to have a clear position but are actually in a complex dialogue with their younger ‘Stalinist’ selves. Thus, *Suburb of Dissent* is about the relationship of ‘America’ to ‘Communism’ in the sense that the two opposed ideologies are ‘irretrievably entangled’, and that patterns of usage have made these two terms ‘mutually constitutive’ (p. 5).

In terms of focus, Irr’s book treats just one site ‘where the ideologemes of America and Communism’ overlap and become reciprocally creating: the literary culture of the North American Left during the 1930s when intellectuals became spokespersons ‘for a Communist Party-sponsored form of cultural nationalism’ (p. 5). This orientation promoted both Communist Americanism (extolling revolutionary heroes and traditions) and the Americanisation of Communism (a focus on consumer culture, and the view of authors as pioneers or rugged individuals). The result was ‘ideological and generic hybrids’ that can be found in literary histories, proletarian novels, and written documentaries which ‘explored and made use of the oddities of their liminal position between American anti-Communism and Communist anti-Americanism’ (p. 5).

In arguing that 1930s left culture ‘was less foreign to contemporary concerns than we might imagine’, Irr holds that the writers were engaged in rethinking the ‘internal and external boundaries of national culture’ so that, rather than propagandists for Soviet Communism, they were more accurately a ‘distinct community of its own’, a suburb of dissent, located ‘on the margins of the larger culture of labor, but organized internally according to its own dynamics’ (p. 6). These writers were a ‘suburb’, for they inhabited a territory ‘somewhere between the mainstream urban intellectuals and a version of “the people” imagined as being rural’, and marked by its inhabitants’ ‘continuing commitment to dissent’ (p. 6).

An additional feature of Irr’s project is her decision to address ‘the issues of nationalism and the U.S./Canadian border by drawing on the insights of postcolonial and New Americanist work’ to theorise a ‘contact zone’ (p. 9). In her research, she encompasses substantial Canadian materials, and she reckons with the US/Canadian border without ignoring nationalism and thereby subsuming Canadian culture into a ‘North-American’ framework.

At the same time, the leftist subculture is understood by Irr to spill across national borders even as it is stamped by boundaries. This is a pivotal component of Irr’s preoccupation with expanding the spatial or geographical perimeters of the 1930s (in contrast to cultural historians such as myself, who have focused on linking the 1930s to subsequent decades). Moreover, her method of critique involves a focus on national
culture, proletarian culture, and consumer culture from the perspective of Raymond Williams’s categories of residual, emergent, and dominant cultures.

The first area, national culture, is addressed in three chapters that sequentially treat the history of the literary Left, John Dos Passos’s *USA* trilogy, and the early writings of Canadian Hugh MacLennan. Proletarian writing is the focus of chapters on the US proletarian novel, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and Canadian narratives of ethnicity and assimilation. Consumer or mass culture is the focus of chapters on short fiction in periodicals published in the United States and Canada, Nathanael West’s *A Cool Million*, and Dorothy Livesay’s documentary poems. The volume concludes with observations on the prophetic nature of much of this literature in terms of its concerns with contemporary issues, and returns again to the reciprocity in our definitions of ‘Communism’ and ‘America’.

It is hard not to be impressed, indeed, overwhelmed, by the daring of Irr’s effort in this first book. She has a sophisticated grasp of contemporary theory, and, indeed, places herself in the vanguard of those who have found a means of rendering a literary tradition too often depicted as weary and repetitious into a truly ‘usable past’ for the present generation. Her choosing to address questions of nationalism and transnationalism, especially through the Canadian/US intersection, is pathbreaking. Her reading of literature and history of the era is wide, and the authority with which she raises and addresses novel issues is compelling.

However, the in-depth research in chapters on *USA* and *Native Son* is rather slight for a scholarly book. Moreover, too many of the authors cited in passing are merely disembodied names. Perhaps due to the northern border focus, writers of colour (other than Wright) and US ethnic dimensions (other than some brief mentions of Jewish issues) are downplayed. From time to time, troubling political and literary complications are skirted when they cry out to be confronted. Finally, Irr takes too much credit for her turn away from rooting the cultural achievements of the 1930s in the Marxist political commitments of the artists and their affiliation with the communist movement; the route she takes was pioneered by many others, especially Richard Pells in *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (1973).

In sum, this is a marvellous literary intervention, but also the work of a scholar who is so quick and facile that depth and precision on occasion seem sacrificed for a dazzling turn of phrase. The writer has developed a breezy literary style, replete with the latest cultural studies buzzwords, that may be off-putting to in-depth researchers. Yet she also knows how to construct a creative angle of approach that, for me, brightens up the landscape and stimulates new ideas and perspectives.

Many of the strengths of Irr’s work are evident in Michael Szalay’s volume, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*, nearly 350 pages long and energetic throughout. His thematic focus is so simple and obvious that one wonders why it has never been attempted before! Historians of the United
States have mainly treated the New Deal as the ‘big’ story of the 1930s, with the far Left as a somewhat specialised sub-field; yet literary scholars have taken the reverse tact, focusing chiefly on the Communist-led cultural movement and dismissing the Roosevelt administration as boring. Szalay, however, sees the New Deal, with its ‘actuarial modes of governance’, as the centrepiece, creating ‘a literature of liberal independence, as writers looked to reconcile at times conflicting impulses toward individual agency and collective affiliation’ (p. 2).

The writers he chooses to examine, however, are not mainly reacting to the New Deal and the ‘modern state’s response to a crisis of its social legitimacy’ (p. 3). They are responding to ‘a similar crisis facing modern literature as well’, leading to ‘new accounts of how modernist concerns with form and audience might engage political and economic experience’ (p. 3). It is not that Szalay is uninterested in writers of the far Left, many of whom were, in fact, the most impressive craftsmen of their day; rather, he holds that ‘an ideologically diverse group of writers from the left as well as the right were active participants in the reinvention of modern governance’ (p. 3) in their literary engagements. Szalay extends his range over an extraordinary array of figures, yoking together books by Jack London, Betty Smith, Ayn Rand, James M. Cain, Richard Wright, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein, and poetry by Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost – along with the musicals of Busby Berkeley!

This is an exemplary first book because Szalay advances new and stimulating issues in his asking the neglected fundamental questions. Moreover, he stimulates the reader’s imagination in his audacious linking of the modern élite to mass culture, while simultaneously moving across the political spectrum from Left to Right.

Yet Szalay takes a long time to elaborate his basic argument, and, when summarised, it seems (intentionally) hard to pin down. Indeed, the Introduction should have more clearly and incisively stated the thesis, and projected the overall structure through which he intends to demonstrate it. Similar to Rubin, his (non) definition of ‘modernism’ also turns out to be a troubling: ‘I use the term . . . to designate the literature of the first half of this century; within this field I have applied no acid test, no checklist of aesthetic distinction’ (p. 5). What does it mean, then, to refer to Wallace Stevens as a poet ‘whose modernist credentials are imagined to be beyond question’, if that only means that he wrote in the first half of the twentieth century? And why do such writers stop being ‘modernists’ after 1950? Is it not enough to agree that Theodore Dreiser and Hart Crane are both in their own way ‘modern’? Why does publishing work between 1900 and 1950, regardless of style and content, make one a ‘modernist’?

There is no disagreement that a narrow definition of high modernism as expressing the Eliot-Pound sensibility has its problems, especially when given an aesthetic clout based on a caricature of the alleged lack of complexity found in other literary strategies (realism, naturalism, proletarian writing, regionalism). But abolishing hoary categories is the easy part; proposing more effective ones is much more challenging.
While there is much of value in cultural studies that has been liberated by this move to divest modernism of the definitions bestowed on it by the ‘New Criticism’, perhaps the new millennium should be a time for taking stock of the limitations of the particular strategy of transforming a cultural definition into a chronological one. In the long run, I suspect that New Deal Modernism’s most enduring contribution is likely to be its fascinating demonstration of the widespread and hitherto unrecognised existence of references to the actuarial, including relations between form and audience. It certainly adds wonderfully to our understanding of both literary history and the content of various texts, but it is also a paradigm much too restricted to characterise the entire epoch, especially when the full scope of the lives and œuvres of the artists are factored in. Nevertheless, Szalay has in this book established himself as a distinctive voice in mid-twentieth-century criticism.

The previous evaluations suggest that the dominant trend in scholarship on the literary Left has tended to drift toward bold theoretical and conceptual challenges, relying less on the careers of Marxist cultural workers (such as the critical study of Newhouse) and more on the incorporation of a particular text into some larger project in modern literature (Jewish gangsters, suburbs of dissent, New-Deal culture). However, Cary Nelson, the most influential theorist of left poetry in the United States, has managed to keep both balls juggling simultaneously. On the one hand, Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left is an elegantly written intervention that balances detailed and nuanced research into the life of an extraordinary neglected Communist writer, Edwin Rolfe. On the other, the book engages a daring theoretical argument about the collective ‘chorus’ of political voices that comprises the necessary framework for returning to memory and history a tradition that speaks imperatively to our contemporary needs.

Nelson’s methodological admonitions, presented almost as theses in his dense Introduction, but appearing throughout the additional chapters, are replete with the kind of wisdom that comes only from decades of thinking hard about basic questions in aesthetic production and reception. Following Fredric Jameson, Nelson urges us to ‘always historicize’ – but ‘in several registers’ (p. 1). These angles are: 1) ‘from the perspective of the period under consideration; 2) from within a critique of the enabling and disabling conditions of current culture; and 3) with an awareness of the institutional history of our interpretive practices’ (p. 1)

In the section called ‘Modern Poems We Have Wanted to Forget’, Nelson particularises this program. He commences by demonstrating that the biggest gap in our understanding of left poetry is not the much red-baited Great Depression but ‘the half century that leads up the 1930s’ (p. 2). Next, Nelson provides several paradigms for reconstruction. The first is the subject of the section called ‘From the Great Depression to the Red Scare: The Poetry of Edwin Rolfe’, where Nelson provides an admirably researched and discriminating use of biography and history to revivify the man and
his work. A second (found in the sections called ‘Poetry Chorus: The Politics of Revolutionary Memory’ and ‘Poetry Chorus: How Much for Spain’) offers a stunning argument that ‘in some of the key constitutive moments of political poetry a collective literature is a destination and an overriding value that triumphs over the individual voice’ (p. 3).

In conclusion, Nelson’s astute observations specifically on the matter of left biography are music to the ears of those of us who consider some presence of original biographical research an indispensable component of scholarship on the cultural Left. Indeed, Nelson states that ‘biography is often necessary and inescapable’, although the key is that ‘biography on the Left is almost never primarily a personal story’ (p. 4). That is, while all lives are ‘lived in an historical context’, and even inwardly-turning poets ‘live within historically constituted horizons’ (p. 5), Marxist poets are of a unique order. They are ‘poets whose life and work is formed by meditation on the possibility of historical and political agency to bring these issues to the foreground. For them, historical contingency is the very marrow of their work’ (p. 5). Such a characterisation is apt and memorable not only for the poets, but also for the activist-scholar Nelson, who has opened up so many new vistas on subaltern poetic practice in the twentieth century.
Need, Aspiration, and Opportunity in the Making of American Exceptionalism

I. Simple versus dialectical materialism

Why are the institutions of working-class radicalism so weak in the United States? Despite a long history of strikes and labour militancy, labour unions have fewer members and socialist political parties have been weaker in the United States than in any other advanced capitalist democracy. Because of its political relevance, and because it challenges accepted models of social evolution, the weakness of American socialism has been the central question in labour and social history. Generally written by scholars on the Left, much of this research has concerned what workers could do to form a radical social movement. But focusing simply on workers distorts our understanding of movements that should be assessed on three dimensions: ‘need’, ‘aspiration’, and ‘opportunity’. ‘Need’ treats the objective conditions behind labour militancy: poverty, poor working conditions, and political repression. Activists emphasise ‘need’ because it can make the strongest case to win allies for reform movements. But ‘need’ alone has never provided a basis for a social movement; the poorest and most downtrodden workers rarely form unions or political movements. Beyond ‘need’, there must be ‘aspirations’, or the belief that social change can be achieved through collective action. Scholars from Sombart and Hartz to Lipset, Wilentz and Davis associate the lack of socialist institutions with popular ‘aspirations’ by assuming that, if workers wanted social change, then they would establish such institutions. The absence of such institutions, therefore, reflects popular conservatism, the lack of popular ‘aspiration’ for social change.

It is the central idea of historical materialism that ‘aspirations’ do not come from a void but are grounded in material reality, tempered by ‘opportunity’ or the likelihood that any particular programme for social change can be achieved. Aspiring to the possible, people shun projects likely to fail. Experience is reinforced because institutions better adapted to the available opportunities are more likely to survive; those that
pursue ambition without regard for opportunity, by contrast, are less able to protect their activists and will shed members.¹

Satisfied with this analysis, simple materialists search for the roots of social movements in the economic structures of society and the history behind its culture and prevailing ideologies. Much Marxist historiography evaluates the role of different material circumstances, such as productive technology, and group size and heterogeneity, in the shaping of revolutionary movements. But that is not Marxism’s original contribution. As a social science and a theory of social action, Marx’s distinctive idea was dialectical materialism, his theory of ‘revolutionising practice’ or the ‘coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity’.² Recognising how class conflict, shapes material circumstances, Marx appreciated how human action shapes social institutions and the opportunities available to social movements. More than a merely product of opportunity, aspirations are also a component of the material world because they are embodied in the material world as human action.

Seen dialectically, American exceptionalism is more than economic circumstances, culture and ideology, but is the legacy of past class conflict including labour’s defeats. Recognising the importance of economic conditions and cultural history, dialectical materialists study labour movements by considering human agency, the strength of labour organisations, the rules governing social strife, the actions of state authorities and labour’s allies, and the vitality of labour’s opponents. To study labour, dialectical materialists study employers and state officials because they too determine the opportunities available to movements and shape their aspirations.

II. Southern textile unions and the New Deal

Janet Irons’s study of the Southern textile strike of 1934 shows the dialectics of need, opportunity, and aspiration in the American labour movement. There has always been ‘need’ in Southern textiles. From the industry’s beginning in the 1880s, workers laboured for meagre wages in hot, humid, dusty rooms, for eleven- or twelve-hour days. Living in wholly-owned company towns, they were branded as ‘inferior’ for their poverty, their primitive living conditions, and their susceptibility to diseases like pellagra and hookworm. There was no shortage of ‘need’ in Southern textiles.

Sometimes, there were also aspirations to improve life through social action. Contesting their circumstances, Southern textile workers would resist particularly oppressive supervisors to defend established working conditions. Some joined in the national labour movements of the late nineteenth-century, including the National Union of Textile Workers (an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL)) and the Knights of Labor (KOL). Especially active in the mid-1880s, these left no

¹ This is the central point in Friedman 1998.
institutional legacy. They were crushed by employers who evicted strikers and used spies and private guards to identify union activists for punitive action.

Right away, Irons identifies that the real issue is not why Southern workers lacked ambition but why their employers were so effective in destroying labour unions. Violent repression was only one of their tools against unions. More important were the emerging ‘regional ideologies of southern redemption and white supremacy’ (p. 17) because these prevented labour from forming effective alliances. Racism justified a one-party system that precluded a political challenge to élite rule. Southern claims of distinctiveness discredited alliances made with Northern labour organisations or liberals. By isolating the South, Southern ideology forced Southern labour to stand alone in an unequally contest with employers.

This ideology was important because Southern employers were vulnerable to a challenge from their workers if supported by outside allies. One such opportunity came during World War I. A ‘war for democracy’, World War I gave workers a new framework to evaluate their circumstances, fostering new aspirations and providing new opportunities because they had a new basis on which to form alliances. Irons quotes James Barrett, a North Carolina textile union leader: ‘We fought like the devil for democracy over yonder, and we want a pound or two in this little old North Carolina state’ (p. 19). Anxious to avoid embarrassing disputes that could disrupt the war effort, the Federal government established the War Labor Board to encourage collective bargaining and union recognition. Encouraged, Southern textile workers formed unions; 40,000 joined locals of the AFL-affiliated United Textile Workers of America (UTW). Rising labour unrest shows what Southern textile workers would do if afforded the opportunity. But federal support evaporated quickly once the war ended and, without this countervailing power, Southern employers and state officials did not hesitate to use private and public force to eliminate the presence of an ‘outside’ union. Astonished that their workers would join an alien movement like the UTW, Southern mill owners refused any concessions to their workers’ organisation. Instead, they hired thugs to beat up labour activists and brought in the state militia to break strikes.3 As Irons concludes:

That no voices were raised in opposition to the use of force to break strikes suggests just how much the ‘better’ classes in the South continued to see the mill owners as benefactors, and mill workers as a liability and an embarrassment in need of control and supervision. If southern textile unions were to succeed it would be necessary for the balance of power to shift. Textile workers needed allies, constituencies in the larger society who would be willing to weigh in against the power of the mill owners. (p. 22)

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3 Research on the use of repression against American labour is well summarised in Norwood 2002.
III. New-Deal aspirations, opportunities, and the strike of 1934

The heart of Irons’s study is the textile strike of 1934. Perhaps the most spectacular of the failed rebellions of Southern workers, and the largest single strike in Southern industrial history, it lasted for three weeks beginning in September 1934, and involved nearly 200,000 strikers, two-thirds of the total workforce in Southern textiles. The cutting edge of the period’s labour unrest, these strikers could have founded strong labour unions to support continued labour militancy. This is what their counterparts did in Michigan, California, and elsewhere through the North. But little remains from the 1934 textile strike in Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Instead, strike defeat led to the nearly complete eradication of independent unionism in Southern textiles.

The union boom and strike of 1934 grew out of the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Here is the substance of Irons’s argument that conflict, power, and repression are the keys to understanding Southern labour. Southern textile workers had long felt the need for union protection and they sometimes aspired to win collective representation. But they were able to form unions only when political circumstances, the New Deal, gave them the opportunity. They could realistically aspire to unionise only when outsiders showed a readiness to step in to support their organisations against otherwise overwhelmingly powerful local élites. The impetus to unionise and strike was not in their ‘need’, not in low wages and difficult circumstances; Southern textile workers had faced declining real wages and increased workloads throughout the 1920s without a powerful resistance movement emerging. Instead, the rebellion of 1934 came because workers saw an opportunity to form independent unions when the Great Depression weakened the South’s political élite and brought in Northern politicians and unions.

The Great Depression created opportunities for social reform and fostered ambition for change because it brought to power new political leaders less sympathetic with employers. Even in the deep South, the depression discredited politicians allied with business interests. In 1932, for example, the textile district of Anderson, South Carolina elected John C. Taylor to Congress, a former mill worker who favoured higher minimum wages and restrictions on hours of labour and workloads. Most important was the election of Franklin Roosevelt as President in 1932, pledged to enact a ‘New Deal’ for America’s working people. This precipitated a crisis for American employers because it shifted the balance of power between management and labour and raised workers’ aspirations. ‘The New Deal’, Irons writes, became ‘a rallying cry for a public looking for hope in the midst of despair’. Southern textile workers ‘were among Roosevelt’s most enthusiastic recruits’ sending the president, his wife, and his advisers, thousands of letters with advice, expressing gratitude, or describing problems (p. 63).

Initially, employers favoured the centrepiece of the New Deal, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933. They expected that NIRA employer-dominated industry committees would regulate production and prices to restore profits. But, under the
new administration, employers had to accept provisions in the NIRA favourable to labour, including commitments to raise wages and Section 7(a) of the NIRA mandated collective bargaining. Labour interpreted the NIRA as a shift in government policy towards ‘the labouring classes of people’. The enactment of a government commitment to collective bargaining, higher wages, and shorter working weeks provoked ‘dances and celebrations’ (p. 64). Workers felt that the government was now on their side. Labour’s enhanced status in the Roosevelt administration, the opportunities the New Deal gave them, encouraged them to raise their ambitions and to join together to win improved conditions. ‘It is impossible,’ Irons writes, ‘to overestimate the sense of hope mill workers felt because of the Code. It legitimized their sense of place in society. It also created an intense loyalty to the New Deal and to President and Mrs Roosevelt’ (p. 77).

Section 7(a) gave Federal support for unions for the first time since World War I. Union membership jumped with the enactment of the NIRA. More workers than ever before ‘mustered up the courage’ to take action when, for the first time in a generation, Southern workers felt themselves included in the national interest. Over 75 per cent of the South Carolina mills had a union local by the autumn of 1933, but membership rates varied widely. Nearly all workers were unionised in some mills but others remained completely non-union where employers ‘brazenly ignored 7(a)’ (p. 69).

Workers quickly grew disenchanted with the NIRA because it did little to protect workers’ rights to organise or to provide higher wages or better working conditions. Either through delay or design, the NIRA bureaucracy was more responsive to employers than to workers. ‘Out of several hundred cases on the stretchout we have placed before the Board,’ UTW president Thomas McMahon complained, ‘we haven’t received one adjustment’ (p. 119). Realising that the New Deal offered fewer opportunities than they had hoped, workers could have responded by abandoning their new ambitions. But, rather than driving workers out of unions, disenchantment with the NIRA led to renewed militancy. Instead of discarding their new aspirations as unrealistic, workers decided that ‘the success of the New Deal depended on them and on their willingness to courageously take action to support a vision of justice in which they believed’ (p. 71).

Convinced that management had no ‘notion of living up to Article 7a’ and that the federal government would not intervene on its own, textile unionists took direct action. And they brought their national union with them. Fearful of antagonising government officials and powerful employers, the UTW’s Northern leadership had, at first, hesitated to support its new Southern members. But even cautious AFL representatives were drawn to support Southern strikes against aggressively hostile employers and terrible working conditions. Sliding down a slippery slope, the national union leadership hired more organisers and expanded its operations in the South until the traditionally conservative UTW found itself at the head of a genuine insurgency. When over two
hundred Southern delegates appeared at the UTW convention in August 1934, it changed the way the national UTW viewed the South. Encountering Southern cotton mill workers for the first time, even hard-boiled Northern activists were dismayed both at their poverty and at the extraordinary repression their Southern comrades faced. Badly beaten by management thugs just days before, William Adcock of Huntsville offered ‘to give my life to get better conditions for the southern textile workers’ (p. 118). Such words drowned out any doubts about supporting the Southern demand for a general strike. The vote was unanimous.

Thus, first encouraged and then disappointed by the New Deal, the Southern textile workers forced their union to take a defiant stand. Without money or staff, the UTW entered the strike hoping that it would ‘be won by the spirit of the men and women who have invested their lives in this industry’ (p. 121). There was plenty of spirit. Far from an industrial action, the Southerners saw the strike as a spiritual work where they were the righteous agents of New Deal justice. ‘The first strike on record,’ Roy Lawrence, president of the North Carolina Federation of Labor, said, ‘was the strike in which Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt. They too struck against intolerable conditions’ (p. 121).

The textile strikers set out to evangelise their fellow workers, to spread their gospel of hope in collective action. They formed caravans of hundreds, even thousands, travelling along the South’s highways to force mills to close. These ‘flying squadrons’ of textile unionism expanded the strike geographically and also morally and legally. Largely peaceful, they carefully refrained from harming persons or property. But even peaceful picketing confronts the authority of property-owning businessmen over their mills and their surroundings. By challenging power and property, the flying squadrons provoked employers who deployed armed guards and flooded the offices of Southern governors with demands for military intervention.

Wide support and innovative tactics could not save a strike that was overwhelmed by employers and their political flunkies. Irons describes the brutal tactics of anti-union Southern employers, the beatings and discriminatory firings, the evictions from company-owned towns, and the murders. These tactics were tolerated by state officials who even assisted in the violation of workers’ rights. In North and South Carolina, entrenched governors promptly deployed the state militia to drive away pickets; Georgia’s governor had to wait until after he won renomination in the state’s primary to declare martial law and arrest strike leaders throughout the state. The results were always frightening and sometimes bloody. At Duneen Mill in Greenville, South Carolina, for example, 425 national guardsmen were deployed with instructions to ‘shoot to kill’, to break up pickets. No one died at Duneen Mill; but private guards killed seven strikers in nearby Honea Mill (p. 133).

Such powerful repression could not overcome by Southern textile workers on their own; their only hope was to arouse outside support to force their employers to
negotiate. Their strike was lost because the North had little patience with Southern strife. No federal troops were sent south, nor did the president push for negotiations or an arbitrated settlement. Fearful to antagonise powerful Southern politicians, Roosevelt carefully distanced himself from strikers who believed they were advancing his New-Deal agenda. Rather than condemn the guards and their employers for the murders at Honea Mill, Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins called the affair ‘an unfortunate situation’ (p. 149). Such words could hardly galvanise public sympathy for the textile workers. Instead, news of the killings validated what many in Washington thought they knew: that the strike was a foolhardy enterprise conducted by backward Southerners.

IV. Creating exceptionalism

Participation in strikes can be a transformative event. But participation in the textile strike of 1934 taught a hard lesson in how limited opportunities were for collective action in the South. Defeat taught Southern workers to lower their aspirations because there were no real opportunities for successful collective action. This makes Irons’s story of the Southern textile strike of 1934 a meditation on American exceptionalism. Without a strong Southern labour movement, Northern unions could not remain vibrant nor could they construct a powerful political movement. This makes the question of American exceptionalism turn on the failure of Southern unionism, the defeat of the textile strike of 1934.

The strike never lacked ‘need’ or ‘aspiration’. Sensing an opportunity under the early New Deal, Southern workers quickly aspired to collective bargaining and social reform. Had a New-Deal government protected their strike and their unions, a union of textile workers could have been built comparable to the United Auto Workers (UAW) and United Steel Workers (USW). Textile workers certainly had militancy and creativity to match that found in, for example, Flint, Michigan.

What made the South different was a political system that effectively neutralised the power of working-class voters within and federal politicians without. With a few notable exceptions, Southern politicians safely disdained textile workers; one-party rule established by racist politicians and the disfranchisement of working-class voters allowed them to cater exclusively to the rich and powerful. New-Deal governors in Michigan and Pennsylvania repaid working-class voters by supporting union drives; no Southern governor felt any such constraint. Nor could Southern workers turn to Washington for relief. Having built a Democratic majority by uniting the Southern elite with Northern labour, Roosevelt needed Southern congressmen to enact legislation that would, among other things, protect unionisation in the mass-production industries

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4 See, for example, Gall 1998; and Harris 2000.
of the North. As Irons says, ‘the silent price labor paid for the success of the New Deal’ in the North was to abandon Southern labour (p. 176). Of course, now we know that abandoning Southern labour undermined the New-Deal order throughout the United States.

The textile strike of 1934 teaches profound lessons about political economy. Democracy matters: electoral disfranchisement foreshadowed Southern labour’s defeat on the industrial battlefield. Politics matters: state policy is crucial for industrial success and it opens opportunities that lead to higher aspirations. Hope matters: only when the New Deal gave Southern workers hope did they aspire to improve their lot through collective action. Then, through extraordinary energy and courage they carried their struggle forward. Their ambitions fell with the collapse of their action, but it was an extraordinary effort. We are in Janet Irons’ s debt for reminding us of what they did; and of what we all lost when they failed.

References


Academic convention dictates that the 1930s marked the high tide of cultural representations both of US workers and of the Communist Party (CPUSA) and its politics. Overshadowed by journalistic accounts like Eugene Lyons’s 1941 polemic *The Red Decade*, subsequent scholars were at pains to distance themselves from a conspiratorial interpretation. First, they suggested a significant gap between the CPUSA and the literary figures it influenced. Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left* (1961), along with Walter Rideout’s *The Radical Novel in America* (1954), provided a liberal alternative to Cold War exposés of red fiction and rehashes of Lyons’s arguments. More recently, an emphasis on cultural ‘history from below’ has unearthed those not included in the pantheon of what Josephine Herbst saw as the New York-based ‘head boys’. Such approaches were given new impetus with the publication of Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996) and Alan Wald’s *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (2002).¹ Although still concerned with the 1930s as a central ‘proletarian moment’, Laura Hapke uses the recent *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction*² to show that the representation of the US working class has a long literary history.

Whether these accounts have influenced the popular consensus is another matter. Scholarly works make the simplistic notion of a ‘red decade’, characterised by Stalinist infiltration of the arts and intelligentsia, increasingly untenable (sometimes to an excessively Stalinophile extent). Yet these shifts in the academic consensus seldom

¹ See Barnfield 2003. (Wald also discusses the methodology for this process of excavation in his Wald 2000.) Like many of its author’s essays, the latter paper stresses the need to move away from the 1930s almost altogether, by treating that decade’s literary radicalism and worker-writers as part of a longer continuum of the US Left.
² Hapke 2001.
register in wider society. Thus, obituaries, textbooks and cinematic sources as diverse as Kathy Bates’s TV movie *Dash and Lilly* (1999) and Abel Ferrara’s *The Funeral* (1996) tend to reproduce the dominant narrative, prising apart the ideologue and the creative spirit at the expense of explaining the complex interplay between art and politics. (Matters are further confused by the mainstream pundits who casually suggest that the 1999 dot.com crash means we are reliving the 1930s, but that is another story.)

Fortunately, two new works go some way to breaking the deadlock. For Andrew Hemingway, the task in hand is that of producing an account of the visual arts equivalent to Denning’s and Wald’s generational biographies. Meanwhile, Paula Rabinowitz works with less clearly defined materials in order to present the big picture she sees as a hidden mainstream narrative of class, race and gender in the United States.

Whereas the literary ‘Thirties’ forms the basis for an extensive body of scholarship, albeit one often concerned with a ‘canon’ of familiar writers, less is written about the analogous situation in the visual arts. Hemingway’s sense of frustration regarding this is apparent when his commentaries start on the second exhibition in a particular series, the extant records of its predecessor having been lost (e.g. p. 47). By revisiting this fragmentary history, *Artists on the Left* goes beyond much of the existing literature by delivering what is potentially a foundational text for the study of the relationship between the US Communist Left and the visual arts. It is no accident that the title of this volume so closely resembles that of Aaron’s seminal work. In common with the early literary accounts, Hemingway’s volume can serve as an important starting point for considering both the relationship between cultural production and the struggle for socialism, and the artistic methods for best representing US workers.

A key strength of Hemingway’s work is a refusal to be confined to the ‘Depression Decade’ itself. Often the appeal of those narratives that focus on that specific period, and certainly a core theme of mainstream readings, is that the upsurge in proletarian fiction and communist commitment on the part of writers was the product of extreme economic conditions. While there is a rational kernel to this, primarily when looking at those whose fleeting radical loyalties coincided with the slump, the problem with this account is that it ignores the broader continuum from within which the 1930s cultural Left operated. On the surface, there may be sound reasons to treat the Nazi-Soviet Pact or US entry into the Second World War as viable points of closure, as this was when many adherents broke with the CPUSA. They certainly indicate the disastrous influence of the Soviet Union and the official Communist parties on independent working-class politics. However, this focus on or preoccupation with a particular decade tells only part of the story. The proportion of members and fellow travellers who stayed the course through the war years or McCarthy era also have a story to tell. Like Hapke, Wald and others, Hemingway is committed to working with an adequate timeframe to make a sound judgement as to artistic achievement. He finds a logical starting point in the founding of the magazine *New Masses* in 1926 and
continues until the aftermath of 1956 and Khrushchev’s secret speech, after which the Party declined into organisational irrelevance. (Indeed, the closing chapter is more of a study of individual artists given the loss of coherence in the movement they supported.)

It is almost obligatory when discussing a work such as this to consider ‘Stalinism’. Traditionalist scholars, influenced by historian Theodore Draper and taking reopened Soviet archives as their starting point, would argue that the art produced is largely an irrelevance in the light of Moscow’s iron grip over the CPUSA and its primary role as a conduit for espionage. Not so, counter those from or influenced by the 1960s New Left, now possibly the academic majority, for whom ‘history from below’ can unlock the truth about rank-and-file activity. Here, a pattern of relative autonomy emerges; regardless of the official ‘line’ elsewhere, ordinary members did their own thing.

Hemingway works towards a more convincing perspective by harnessing the ‘global’ and ‘local’ aspects of this movement. Particularly in the visual arts, only so much can be explained with reference to the Party line. Thus, he revisits the (somewhat familiar) scenario of American artists praising Soviet developments – whether prolecul or socialist realism – while often lagging behind or losing track of which tendencies were actually in favour with the Stalinist apparatchiks at the time. Yet, simultaneously, the artwork of the US Left showed some diversity of style, in part a product of the collision of other influences: graphic design, Mexican muralism, the Ashcan school and realist regionalism. Time and again, Hemingway shows us divergence between manifesto-like materials and declarations of art’s social purpose, and the actual works in their own right. When the two converge, it is mainly on the question of selecting subject matter: valiant or immiserated workers and a decadent capitalist class figure repeatedly. Clearly, political criteria plays a role in the selection of subject matter; the still life and abstract compositions which no doubt many of these artists practised at and worked their apprenticeships with had at best a minor role as an expression of their commitment.

Those looking for evidence of a Party line translating itself into specific artistic representation will not be disappointed. On the surface, several repetitive stylistic devices are readily apparent. The frequency of particular motifs across the author’s numerous reproductions suggests the existence of a movement culture among Communist artists. Something must explain the repeated images of the enlarged forearms and clenched fists of rugged, ragged worker protagonists set to battle corpulent, top-hatted capitalists. However, Hemingway shows why an emphasis on policy is a lazy and one-dimensional way of accounting for these common scenarios. In fact, he goes so far as to argue that ‘there was no commonality of approach even among those who were most intent in getting over a directly political message’ (p. 58). Certainly, CPUSA leader Earl Browder made but a single public intervention in visual arts matters, a rather ham-fisted complaint about Hugo Gellert’s *Capital in Lithographs* (p. 49).
Yet one area where policy comes to the fore is with the emergence of federally funded works of art. Initially conceived as relief programmes for artists, the Public Works of Art Project, WPA Federal Art Project and Treasury Relief Art Project, among others, stipulated the types of art that could be produced in exchange for unemployment benefits. Whereas critics of the CPUSA point to the Party leadership as piling up prescriptive exhortations for artists to follow, the régime for federal artists was often as strict, particularly for the Section of Fine Arts which oversaw the bulk of federal mural painting. They linked relief payments to the production of ‘socially useful’ art – broadly translated as instantly accessible, non-controversial and conformist. Sharp observers of the new cultural policy régime noted the formal similarities between federal and fellow-travelling art; these coincidences were not lost on those whose subsequent careers were made hunting for un-American activities. Yet, as Hemingway shows, the expansion of the Federal Arts Project posed acute ideological problems for Communist artists.

One explanation for this is the absence of an adequate theory of the state. After the attack on the Bonus March upon its arrival in Washington D.C. under President Hoover’s administration, it was relatively straightforward to talk of the state as ‘special bodies of armed men’. Yet, when comparatively ambitious relief policies were forthcoming from Roosevelt after 1933, it proved harder to make the same mantra stick, especially as presidential and mid-term elections led to a consolidation of working-class support for FDR and the New Deal. For Hemingway, both the CP and contemporary writers like Jonathan Harris fail to recognise the humane dimension of welfare initiatives and thereby reduce worker and artist alike to the role of passive spectator (pp. 79–80), unable to fight a ‘war of position’ within the WPA Federal Art Project and its predecessors. Here, the absence of a wider strategy may have proved paralysing, but this did not prevent leftist artists from pursuing an agenda even while under the auspices of federal patronage.

Hemingway is quick to dismiss the idea that welfare-state strategies may indeed be enervating for working-class independence. He seems to arrive on the scene with a fully formed notion of the state as embodying contradictions and class fractions, asserting rather than explaining this point. Likewise, it seems that the art projects are seldom discussed as being federal dogs capable of wagging their Communist tails. Federal endeavours legitimated strategies of representation that aspired to immediate comprehension – if not photorealism – and an ease of communication with a broad audience. Although arriving via a winding route, taking in Soviet socialist realism and polemics in the New Masses along the way, Communist artists’ preferred representational strategies often converged with those that were federally mandated. Politically, such approaches could soon be converted into propaganda for the war effort once the ‘Grand Alliance’ was in place. In short, the influence of federal art
policy on Communist artists does not receive the same consideration as the role of Communists in government art projects.

Hemingway is often astonishing in the thoroughness and range of artistic endeavours under discussion. As importantly, he considers the contexts of exhibition and circulation, at a time when craft-based art – via post-office murals and other innovations in public spaces – was often functioning as a de facto form of mass communication. Yet, having applied sufficient ‘history from below’, to prise apart movement politics from movement artwork, he makes it harder to ascertain the actual relationship between the two. For instance, there is an early apology for an excessive focus on New York City, yet a more confident pursuit of the ‘big picture’ could help to make clear the significance of this area, home of many of the movers and shakers in the Communist arts scene.

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of Hemingway’s volume, it is clear that arts policy is an almost unavoidable issue. With Paula Rabinowitz’s *Black & White & Noir*, it appears that the links between her immediate concerns and those of ‘the Thirties’ (that is, the academic discourse discussed above, particularly its organisational ‘red decade’ dimension) dissolve almost entirely. Sure enough, there exists a fairly familiar chain of connections linking the CPUSA, proletarian novels and hard-boiled fiction to the writing of noir screenplays and ultimately to the Hollywood blacklist. For Rabinowitz, this complex history is left to hover as a backstory; she is emphatic from the start that this is not another work devoted to film noir per se. Rather, she seeks to catalogue a noir sensibility, the ‘effecto noir’ (p. ix), especially in the light of its capacity to intersect with questions of class formation and its associated issues of collective identity. From her personal vantage point, this form of noir also represents her parents’ hidden past, yet its wider resonance and recurrent themes (culminating here in the Lewinsky affair and Starr Report) indicate the relevance of a continuing investigation.

Part of the charm of *Black & White & Noir* is its refusal to revisit overly familiar ground. Sure enough, *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1946) recur throughout and the introduction opens with a scene from *The Big Heat* (1953). Yet the other noirs under discussion suggest that the standard approach is to be avoided: Robert Siodmak’s *Phantom Lady* (1944), Jean Negulesco’s *Road House* (1948) and Mitchell Liesen’s *No Man of Her Own* (1950). (Also figuring strongly is a 1962 upstart postscript to the genre, Sam Fuller’s *The Naked Kiss.* Such movies feature in order to construct a multifaceted narrative; their main role is to offer a way of suggesting how key shifts in the post-war US social fabric were actually played out.

Consensus locates the film noir cycle in the years between *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Touch of Evil* (1958), taking in up to 220 movies along the way (including Boris Ingster’s *Stranger on the Third Floor*, released prior to Humphrey Bogart’s celebrated turn as Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade). Unlike ‘the Thirties’ as a closed discursive
construct of historiography, actual ‘film noir’ has important antecedents and offshoots. Like literary representations of the worker, the disputed genre can also be treated as part of a broader cinematic tradition. For every Marc Vernet willing to discuss 1930s crime films such as *The Big Gamble* (1931) as a critique of the category noir, there are dozens of publicists plugging the latest ‘noir’ cinema and DVD releases. Perhaps this reinforces Rabinowitz’s ‘pulp theory’ that the recurrence of the sensibility throughout history highlights its continuing relevance.

Conventionally, film noir can be identified by its use of a form of cinematography derived from German expressionism. Indeed, those objecting to this schema point to Hollywood movies shot prior to 1941 using equivalent techniques. This is not a debate into which Rabinowitz wishes to be drawn, since her account of the origin of the style has a different starting point: photography. As with her previous major work, *They Must Be Represented* (1994), she remains fiercely interdisciplinary. The distinctions between literature, film and photography can be successfully navigated once the identification of common features has taken place. Just as a genre-busting notion of reportage was used to link Walker Evans’s photographs to the video of Rodney King’s beating by the LAPD, so too is the category of noir as a sensibility put to good effect.

Noir’s peculiar look is invented, claims Rabinowitz, through the Office of War Information-funded photography of Esther Bubley, snapping rooming houses and *Nighthawks*-style diners frequented by single women dislocated by recession and war. Interestingly, the state, which we see setting the tone for some of the painters discussed by Hemingway, is also instrumental in providing the template for the *femme fatale* from its soft yet surveillance-based initiatives. Hence pulp modernism, the way that the urban looks we associate with modernity are developed through particular forms of representation. As part of cataloguing social disruption and displacement, a visual language is created which successfully mediates such trends.

Other aspects of state activity attract a less positive assessment, from the intrusive social worker to the fictional cops hunting Richard Wright’s pulp protagonist Cross Damon in *The Outsider* (1953). Cutting ahead to the 1980s, we see the Reagan administration embolden strikebreaking employers at Hormel, intensifying the crisis of the US labour movement. Here, this situation re-ignites the debate over the interaction of pulp and documentary, placing specific responsibilities on documentary makers like Barbara Kopple to act ethically when filming the struggles of Hormel workers (certainly more ethically than Michael Moore did during 1989’s *Roger and Me*). At first glance, Rabinowitz seems to stray from the book’s titular concerns to write about a nearby strike, but, in fact, she successfully uses ‘pulp non-fiction’ – specifically, the

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3 Vernet 1993, pp. 7–12.
4 At the time of writing, these included *The Salton Sea* and the ‘Brit neo-noir’ *Number One Longing, Number Two Regret*. 
The historic use of sentimentality as a strand in the representation of the working class – as a helpful tool in accounting for the foibles of labour documentary films. (Although she does not mention it here, no doubt these strange symmetries were reinforced when Kopple directed an episode of *Homicide: Life on the Street* in which the characters ran into a documentary film crew, headed up by show creator Barry Levinson.)

The final third of *Black & White & Noir* fares less well. It attempts to be more specific, but the argument becomes more difficult to follow, if not more diffuse. (A parallel problem seemed to occur in *They Must Be Represented*.) Like rock music’s proverbial awkward second album, the book’s closing section seems to sit uneasily with its predecessors. In part, this reflects its ‘mode of production’, where reviews and articles from elsewhere are pulled together and reworked, as Rabinowitz freely admits.

The methodology deployed resembles that of the new historicism, where an isolated incident or artefact is scrutinised with a view to explaining (or disavowing) the wider processes unfolding around it. Starting with Barbara Stanwyck’s anklet, an extended discussion of foot fetishism and workboots takes shape. Once the politics of ‘correct toe cleavage’ are under discussion, it appears that a shift to the micropolitics of noir has occurred, mystifying rather than clarifying. Likewise, the subsequent discussions of counterculture documentary and experimental 8mm filmmaking seem to struggle to disclose the noir underpinnings of these genres. Nevertheless, they provide a platform for Rabinowitz’s autobiographical inclinations: the televising of Barbara Stanwyck and Ida Lupino’s fictional adventures energised the author’s early teens and the continuity she found with noir in the 1970s intersections of film and feminism. Thankfully, such theorising from experience makes for an interesting read, although the threshold of evidence in support of her claims seems to diminish as the work progresses. The moment Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is shown establishing Hester Prynne as a forerunner of the *femme fatale* (pp. 226–7), one wonders if noir has become a category so broad as to lose its specific content. As we close amid critical controversy, particularly among feminists, over three works of historical fiction – including Toni Morrison’s 1987 *Beloved* – the noir thread seems to be stretched to breaking point, only sustained by the recurrent theme of its subverting conventional ideas of public and private.

Rabinowitz has a strong argument, but the sheer breadth of her chosen category seems to suggest that noir is both everywhere and nowhere. It accounts for key cleavages in modern America, but sometimes it appears that its broad character – as outlined here as a sensibility predicated on the division of public and private life – could allow it to coincide with almost any cultural phenomena.

Less certain is her take on the contemporary commodification of noir. She opens with a list of the many, mundane ways it has become embedded in a range of merchandise and media, from the Pottery Barn *Dial M for Murder* telephone to the supermarket tabloids continually raking over the O.J. Simpson murder trial (p. 15).
This could be further proof that the noir thematic as she represents it lives on, with a cultural malleability matched only by vampires and the Frankenstein myth. However, the relative ease with which noir can surface defanged throughout contemporary culture suggests that the scope for co-optation is as great as the potential for subversion. There has always been a Mickey Spillane to face off against a Jim Thompson, a *Pick Up on South Street* to counter *Force of Evil*; in short, a conformist noir to match that with a more radical intent. Thus, today, we see Quentin Tarantino, who features more prominently on *Black & White & Noir*’s dust jacket than in the book itself, penning paean to consumerism\(^5\) and directing *Medium Cool*’s roving reporter Robert Forster as a washed-up bail bondsman in *Jackie Brown* (1997). When cable TV leaves TCM chuntering on to itself in the small hours with weekly screenings of *Gaslight* and *The Mask of Dimitrios*, noir’s uncanny and explanatory power is not readily apparent. Like Hemingway’s Communist artists isolated by the collapse of their political party, perhaps the form of noir’s ability to articulate a sense of social change becomes detached from its content once the idea of change is itself disoriented.

Both of the works under review are a welcome contribution to our attempts to assess the complex cultural legacy of the inter-war period and its attendant social changes. Commendably, each refuses to be bound by the conventions of treating ‘the Thirties’ as the sole location of significant development, preferring instead to work from the assumption that the more interesting trends may manifest themselves long after the initial catalyst has faded. In different ways, each adds a distinctively layer to the consideration of how the US working class is historically represented, even hinting at strategies for the future.

### References


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\(^5\) Botting and Wilson 2001 argue that this is in fact an ethical position in an age of excess (pp. 116–43).


I always thought that Ronald Reagan had misunderstood Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, and that is why he lauded it as a great patriotic song. But Bryan Carman has a very different view. He suggests that Springsteen’s music was open to conservative interpretation because of his faith in American democracy and his manliness. This is Carman’s argument in a nutshell: accepting the privileges of whiteness and maleness while criticising a system that made life difficult for working-class people was a tradition that Springsteen inherited from Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie, a tradition that goes back to Walt Whitman. Whitman defended ‘artisan republicanism’ against the dehumanising process of industrialisation in the nineteenth century – he raised concerns about freedom, independence, and equality, but failed to promote class consciousness or structural change. Instead, he emphasised moral truths and a collectivity rooted in homosocial and homoerotic bonds (i.e. bonds between men). While Whitman may have been hailed by American Communists in the 1920s and 1930s as their ‘heroic spiritual grandfather’, he was true to the advice he gave Horace Traubel: ‘Be radical. Be not too damned radical.’

Carman tells us that *A Race of Singers* examines the making of an explicit working-class hero, the process by which cultural workers, predominantly nationally recognized white men with leftist leanings, have consciously invoked and evoked specific Whitmanesque ideals to engage class politics. . . . I argue that these cultural heroes have promulgated a version of white working-class manhood that has provided the ideological cornerstone of leftist culture and politics for over two centuries. (p. 3)

This is not really a new argument; Paula Rabinowitz, among others, has written critically about the predominance of images of white working-class manhood in left culture.¹ What is different about Carman’s work is the emphasis on music and the focus on Whitman’s ideas as the starting point for this view.

¹ See, for instance, Rabinowitz 1987.
Carman begins with the limitations of Whitman’s working-class hero and his descendants, but his main point goes beyond explaining how whiteness and maleness, and the privileges accompanying these attributes, limit the vision of this ‘race of singers’. More explicitly, his criticism is that they have failed to promote a collectivist vision of the future. Their belief in American democracy, and more particularly their republicanism, spiritualism, and morality, make it impossible for them to embrace a materialist political vision.

Yet the author himself demonstrates little interest in the material world. Carman raises important issues about the role of musicians in fomenting social change, but his argument is framed by the literary tradition that begins with Walt Whitman, not by the political and economic limits of commercial capitalism. One exception to this is the section in which the author comments on the many tribute concerts for Woody Guthrie that have been held over the years (see pp. 177–92). After lamenting that the most radical of Guthrie’s songs are rarely performed at such concerts, he goes on to explain how the political context limits artists. Yet he is clearly more concerned with how artists have set limits on themselves. His main point, therefore, is not that commercial success is bought at a political price, but that the whiteness and maleness of the republican tradition limit how far these artists are willing to go in promoting an alternative vision of the future.

This same discussion of Guthrie’s songs highlights one of the problems with Carman’s approach, for he makes little attempt to judge the quality of these songs. The test is only how ‘radical’ the lyrics are. Thus, he bemoans the fact that ‘Vigilante Man’ is rarely heard (at least not with all its verses intact) while ‘Do-Re-Mi’ and other Dust-Bowl songs have become standards. There is no discussion of the relative difficulty of performing these songs or of the responses of audiences.

In his section on Woody Guthrie, Carman’s focus is on the contradictions in his life and the way he is remembered. Guthrie’s ego, individualism, and poor treatment of women come to the forefront. (Surprisingly, Carman misses the best story about Guthrie’s individualism, apocryphal or not: Guthrie was turned down when he applied for membership in the CPUSA because he was considered unreliable in general and too individualistic in particular.) As Carman suggests, Guthrie was frequently irresponsible in his dealings with women; ‘his definition of freedom depended on the subordination of women’ (p. 110). In addition, Carman explains that ‘Guthrie’s individualism both inspired and contained his effectiveness as a cultural worker. On one hand, his iconoclasm enabled him to question authority and to challenge social conventions. On the other, his desire for fame, his dogmatic approach to folk song, and his own self-righteousness circumscribed his political efficacy’ (p. 128). Guthrie’s most famous songs emphasise individual struggle and are ambivalent about politics. Even though he did ‘extend his imagination outside the republican heritage’ and argue the merits of socialism, he has been remembered as a patriot and a symbol of
personal rather than political rebellion. In Carman’s eyes, Guthrie may be a radical hero, but he is not ‘too damned radical’.

Bob Dylan recovered and popularised Guthrie’s politics. But Dylan was as sexist as his mentor and he did not embrace the idea of the working-class hero for long. Instead, he turned to existentialism and ‘self-consciously artistic lyrics [that] ultimately separated him from the class of people Guthrie claimed to represent’ (p. 163). In other words, Dylan may have been radical for a time, but he was too sexist and individualistic – and his songs focus too much on individuals – to be ‘too damned radical’.

Dylan’s relationship with Joan Baez is presented as an example of ‘New-Left sexism’, but Bob Dylan was not exactly a typical member of the New Left. His experience tells us something about him as an individual, but it gives us little insight into the movement for which his songs served as anthems. That movement did indeed grow out of a culture that equated authentic and serious activism with manhood. It took a group of women willing to challenge such premises of the New Left to begin to break down that equation. (Unfortunately, much of the sixties literature blames these women for helping destroy the New Left rather than celebrating their courageous efforts to create a feminist Left.)

It is noteworthy that Bruce Springsteen comes along in the wake of the women’s liberation movement. In Carman’s view, ‘the Boss’ does the best job of reclaiming Guthrie’s political vision, yet he is still limited by the tradition of the working-class hero. Springsteen treats women with dignity, we are told, but still his efforts are circumscribed by ‘homosocial bonding’ and the sort of macho image he presents, to say nothing of his Whitmanesque faith in the republican tradition and his moral and spiritual rather than political and material focus.

Carman also takes Springsteen to task for not presenting a clear, collectivist vision. ‘By representing the dissolution of communal relations, Springsteen implies that collective bonds must be re-established before any sense of social justice can be obtained, but he does not articulate an explicit vision for the future’ (p. 211). This kind of criticism is reminiscent of student responses to social critics such as C. Wright Mills, Christopher Lasch, or Noam Chomsky: ‘All they do is tell you what’s wrong, but they don’t give you a solution!’ Here, Carman would do well to recall Eugene Debs’s famous remark about leadership: that if he could lead people into the promised land, someone else could lead them out again. In other words, any solution must be a collective one that comes from the masses themselves, not from a leader, an ideology, or a singer. Of course, this is precisely the kind of faith in American democracy to which Carman objects. While the author claims to be interested in how radicalism has been both created and limited by such faith in American democracy, his focus is on how the radicalism of these singers has been contained. There is little insight here into how their critical views have been created and sustained.
When you come down to it, what Carman wants are pure heroes who rise above their times and the culture that produced them to present clear Marxist solutions. Yet he never asks whether there is an audience for such artists. He touches on Springsteen’s theory about song writing, which is strikingly similar to Woody Guthrie’s idea, as explained by Joe Klein:

He took a classic high-culture position, arguing against agitprop exhortation. You didn’t have to slam people over the head; it was more artful and effective to show than to tell. He argued that writing a ballad was the ultimate test of a songwriter. Taking the story of an individual and turning it into a metaphor, like ‘Tom Joad,’ was far more difficult than just telling people to go out and join the union.²

Carman is right to suggest that Springsteen’s ideas are descended from Guthrie. His quotes from Springsteen echo Guthrie’s comments about song writing: ‘You can’t tell people what to think. You can show them something by saying “Put on these shoes, walk in these shoes.” People then recognize themselves in characters whose lives on the surface seem to have no relation to theirs’ (p. 249). In a similar vein, Springsteen is explicit about his rejection of the agitprop approach, ‘I think politics are implicit. I’m not interested in writing rhetoric or ideology. . . . I think it was Walt Whitman who said, “The poet’s job is to know the soul.” You strive for that, assist your audience in finding theirs’ (p. 250). What Carman concludes is that Springsteen is incapable of criticising the republican tradition and therefore, while he may be radical, he falls short of being ‘too damned radical’.

The phrase ‘too damned radical’ is used over and over in the book, but the author never clearly defines what he means by ‘radical’. The inference is that a truly radical view is based on a Marxist, structural critique of capitalism that poses socialism as an alternative. The problem is, as the above discussion of song writing suggests, that creative artists are not synonymous with political propagandists. Popular music and revolutionary politics are not the same. It should hardly come as a surprise that Guthrie, Dylan, and Springsteen often tell stories about individuals in their songs so that the audience can walk in someone else’s shoes and recognise the need for social change that will bring greater liberty, equality and justice to all. But, for Carman, it is not enough that, as Springsteen suggests, ‘individuals must accept social responsibility, practice active citizenship, be vigilant for abuses of power, and subordinate self-interest to the good of the community’. He wants more. Yet, if Carman got his wish for more pure working-class heroes with the right politics, they would not be likely to reach the sort of audience that Springsteen does, for both political and aesthetic reasons. Historically, Americans have rejected collectivist solutions that appear to threaten

democracy and individualism as they know it. Moreover, while the 1960s ushered in an era of popular music based in social criticism, many of the best songs of that era, Dylan’s in particular, were extremely poetic and noteworthy for the fact that they did not offer solutions or blueprints for the future.

Ironically, it is the materialist analysis missing from *A Race of Singers* that is one of the book’s biggest weaknesses. Carman spends very little time talking about how music is received by audiences. More specifically, he seems curiously uninterested in why these particular singers have been able to reach broad audiences with their music. But the question of trade-offs is crucial. To put it bluntly, could these singers be more ‘damned radical’ and still have the impact they have had? One exception to Carman’s overall neglect of this question is his discussion of the Weavers. Here he makes clear that he recognises the compromises musicians often must make in order to popularise their songs and make them accessible to broad audiences: in the Weavers’ case the political context mandated such compromises. Yet, interestingly enough, Carman concludes that, even with the compromises the Weavers made during the McCarthy era – making song lyrics more palatable to a white middle-class audience, using orchestral arrangements instead of traditional instruments, dressing more formally, appearing on television rather than at hootenannies and union halls –, they still radicalised popular music because of the political significance of the folk tradition they were sharing.

It is probably no coincidence that the Weavers do not fit in to the republican tradition that provides the focus for this book. If Carman tried to put Pete Seeger and Ronnie Gilbert, or Paul Robeson for that matter, into his ‘race of singers’, they would not fit. In fact, they are a bit closer to the sorts of heroes and heroines Carman seems to be seeking, yet he is not explicit about their politics or their role in the tradition of American protest music. Are they ‘too damned radical’?

Finally, while on one level it is impossible to argue with Carman’s thesis, he tends to understate the achievement of these singers. He seems to be aware at times that this is a problem; for example, he states in an endnote ‘I have tried to recognize Springsteen’s achievement while simultaneously placing him in an artistic tradition replete with contradictions’ (p. 303). There is plenty of room to criticise the ‘race of singers’ on whom Carman focuses his attention. His book raises important issues, sometimes explicitly and sometimes inadvertently, about the Left’s view of democracy, the effects of commercialism on culture, and the settings in which songs are performed, yet leaves out another, important question: given the crucial role that music has played in helping to build and sustain left-wing movements in the United States, where would we be without this music?
References


On 20 January 2003, Business Week’s front cover queried, ‘Class Warfare?’ – as if the question needs asking in George W. Bush’s America. ‘Suppose the rich get richer and income inequality gets worse’, Business Week mused – its unspoken question, ‘Can we still get away with it?’ The truth is, they have been getting away with it for more than twenty-five years, in a one-sided class war. The US now ranks not only as the world’s richest society, but as the most unequal in the advanced industrialised world.1 Through boom and slump alike – and with the complicity of both the Democratic and Republican Parties – class inequality has increased steadily since the mid-1970s, now rivalling the record levels of the Roaring Twenties, the decade before the New Deal.

Nelson Lichtenstein’s new book provides an urgently needed historical perspective on the dynamics of class relations in the US. A respected labour historian, Lichtenstein has contributed to a variety of debates over the course of more than two decades. His book Labor’s War at Home is an invaluable study of the massive strike waves during and immediately after World War Two and the anti-Communist witch hunt that followed. Lichtenstein’s book The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit is a biography of labour leader Walter Reuther, whose influence spanned from the Depression decade through to the period of the early Vietnam War. Lichtenstein is also an activist. During 1996–8 he played a key role in organising a series of teach-ins on university campuses that brought together labour leaders, including AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, with intellectuals and students – winning a new generation of students to labour-movement organising (p. 262).

Lichtenstein begins his new book – rightly – with the present, stating plainly the staggering toll of the employers’ offensive since the 1970s. ‘Four out of five households take home a thinner slice of the economic pie than they did a quarter century before’, Lichtenstein writes (pp. 14–15).2 The decline in wages has been especially pronounced

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2 Family incomes have risen slightly overall during this period, but only because of the rise in two-income households and longer work hours. On average, US workers labour two hundred hours more per year than Canadians and roughly four hundred more than Germans – even surpassing the annual work hours of Japanese workers (p. 14). Moreover, this slight rise in family
among young male workers, whose real wages declined by 25 per cent from the early 1970s to the early 1990s (p. 213). And ‘[r]eal household income for young families (breadwinners under age thirty) stood at one-third less than their counterparts in 1973, even though their total work hours were longer and the educational level of the head of household was higher than a generation before’ (pp. 13–14).

It is not a coincidence that union membership also entered a downward spiral in the mid-1970s. At its high point in the early 1950s, more than 30 per cent of US workers belonged to unions. By the turn of the century, just 13.5 per cent of the workforce was unionised, and within the private sector, only 9 per cent (p. 16). Strike levels, furthermore, plummeted from the early 1980s, when Reagan famously broke the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers, (PATCO) strike, giving the green light for companies to openly bust unions and decimate shop-floor organisation. Lichtenstein notes, ‘In 1999, there were only thirty-five strikes involving more than 1,000 workers; twenty-five years before, there had been ten times that many’ (p. 16).

Meanwhile, CEOs have seen their earnings rise by a staggering 2,500 per cent. In 1970, the average real compensation for the CEOs of the top 100 corporations was 39 times the pay of the average worker. Today, they earn more than 1,000 times the average worker’s wage.\(^3\) At the same time, the income tax rate for the richest individuals – which stood at 95 per cent in the 1950s and 70 per cent in 1980 – has fallen to 38.5 per cent, and is now set to fall further still under Bush’s plan for sweeping tax reform.

Ronald Reagan has received most of the credit for launching this one-sided class war, but it predated his presidency by a number of years. Its roots lay in the end of the postwar economic boom for US capitalism. As Lichtenstein argues,

> profits of US firms peaked in the mid-1960s and then proceeded to decline for the next fifteen years. By the early 1980s, they were approximately one-third less than a generation before; in the manufacturing sector only about one-half. Productivity growth fell to less than half the postwar pace and dropped well behind that of most US trading partners. (p. 213)

Breaking the back of the labour movement was a key element of the employers’ strategy to restore US economic competitiveness internationally. Working-class combativity had risen sharply in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The number of wildcat (unauthorised) strikes across all industries doubled, from 1,000 to 2,000 between 1960 and 1969. The year 1970 was the high point of this strike wave. General Motors experienced a 67-day strike. Some 40,000 coal miners struck in three states to demand benefits for disabled miners. Postal workers closed down the postal service in 200
cities. Teamsters went out on strike and many stayed out for up to a month after Teamster president Frank Fitzsimmons ordered them back to work.4

Already in 1978, United Auto Workers (UAW) president Douglas Fraser observed that business leaders were waging ‘a one-sided class war in this country’ (p. 236). In 1979, Business Week editorialised,

It will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow – the idea of doing with less so that business can have more. . . . Nothing that this nation, or any other nation, has done in modern economic history compares in difficulty with the selling job that must be done to make people accept the new reality.5

The AFL-CIO estimated that more than 1,000 union-busting consultant firms were operating across the US by 1979.6

The 1979 bailout of Chrysler, the third largest automaker, set the bargaining pattern for the next decade. The Carter administration intervened to rescue Chrysler from bankruptcy. But Congress refused to give Chrysler its $1.2 billion in loan guarantees unless its workers agreed to massive wage and benefit concessions, totalling $462 million. This included a wage freeze and giving up 17 days of paid vacation. UAW president Doug Fraser was awarded a seat on Chrysler’s board of directors after agreeing to these concessions. But, a year later, Chrysler was back demanding more concessions, which this time totalled $673 million dollars, and involved a pay cut of $1.15 per hour and the loss of three more vacation days. By 1985, Chrysler had restored its profitability, but management’s demands for concessions continued.7 As Lichtenstein describes, ‘The story of the Chrysler bailout is like a piece of film – in this case it is the New Deal movie – run backward’ (p. 233).

In the mid-1970s, the US ruling class was also recovering from its humiliating defeat to the national-liberation movement in Vietnam – accompanied by an enormous anti-war movement and other radical social movements at home. The late 1960s working-class revolts were often led by young workers influenced by the rising social movements and the radical atmosphere. The rise of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) in a May 1968 wildcat strike led by black workers at Detroit’s Dodge Main Chrysler plant reverberated throughout the auto industry.8

From its beginning, the employers’ offensive entailed an ideological assault on the social movements of the 1960s, intended to erase the nation’s memory of that era of struggle and its symbolic victories. Affirmative action and abortion rights have been under attack ever since. ‘Reaganism’, as practised by both political parties, also aimed

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8 See Georgakis and Surkin 1975; Foner 1981.
to deepen the divide between white workers and those of all other races, blacks in particular. Reagan courted the white racist vote in 1980 by repeatedly assuring audiences that he had consistently opposed civil rights and even resurrected the slogan of Southern segregationists, ‘The South will rise again!’ Nearly every social spending cutback was justified by a racist or sexist stereotype, often both. ‘Welfare’, ‘drugs’ and ‘crime’ have been the racist code words scapegoating poor blacks for over two decades.

Twenty years later, George W. Bush has vigorously resurrected this racist formula, choosing, for example, to launch a frontal assault on what remains of affirmative action (calling it ‘unfair’ to whites) in a speech ‘celebrating’ civil-rights leader Martin Luther King’s birthday in January 2003. Bush’s tax cuts for the rich – like Reagan’s – are just part of a multi-pronged assault on the entire working class, aimed at lacerating what little remains of the social safety net serving the poorest of the poor and quashing the already-pummelled power of the unions. The employers’ demands for hefty concessions resumed full throttle in the first recession of this century, as airlines such as United, facing bankruptcy, set the concessionary pattern for the entire airline industry – and potentially for industry as a whole. The one-sided class war that has been raging for twenty-five years shows no signs of abating.

**Roots of working-class retreat**

But, if the employers’ motivation for launching an assault on US workers is straightforward, the reasons why the union movement so readily backed down are more complex. How did the US working class, renowned for its combativey throughout the first half of the last century, enter such a sustained retreat from struggle a quarter of a century later?

Lichtenstein convincingly argues that the employers’ offensive that began in the 1970s has its roots in the immediate postwar period. He challenges the notion – still prevalent within sections of the Left – that the US working class benefited from a so-called ‘labour-management accord’ during the prosperous 1950s and 1960s. ‘Real wages doubled in the twenty years after 1947, but strikes were also ten times more prevalent than in the years after 1980’, he notes (p. 99). Unionised workers, in particular, experienced dramatic improvements in their living standards, but they paid the price of a drastic rise in the rate of exploitation. Output per worker more than doubled between 1947 and 1972. The real beneficiaries sat on the boards of directors of the biggest US corporations. The employers’ strategy was straightforward – a trade-off of higher wages in exchange for curbing workers’ rights on the job.

Rising living standards did have an impact, however. The number of strikes remained high, but their character evolved during this period. Strikes tended to be shorter and

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9 Smith 1992, p. 4.
involved fewer workers in the 1950s, and still fewer in the first half of the 1960s. The resolve that typified Depression-era picket lines was gradually replaced by passivity, as workers became accustomed to waiting out strikes, rather than playing a central role.

With anti-Communism emerging as their political backdrop, business leaders devised a long-term strategy to disarm the power of unions and rid society of the political reforms won through Depression-era struggle. ‘As Alfred Sloan of General Motors analogized at the end of World War II: “It took fourteen years to rid this country of prohibition. It is going to take a good while to rid the country of the New Deal, but sooner or later the axe falls and we get a change”’ (p. 107). In 1951, the editors of *Fortune* magazine could already congratulate US capital for finding a uniquely ‘American’ solution to the ‘problems of class struggle and proletarian consciousness’.

The Taft-Hartley Act passed by Congress in 1947, a set of anti-union measures that also required all trade unionists to sign an affidavit declaring they were not Communists, was an enormous political defeat for the union movement, ushering in the era of McCarthyism. But two additional defeats – the CIO’s failure to unionise the South and the privatisation of social welfare – also dealt decisive blows to the American working class, whose disabling effects have, if anything, grown with the passage of time.

The CIO conducted a massive organising drive aimed at unionising the racially segregated and viciously anti-union South in 1946–7. But Operation Dixie ended in dismal failure, and the Southern US has offered a permanent supply of low-paid, non-union workers ever since. As Lichtenstein argues, this allows businesses to ‘solve their “labor problem” by simply replacing one workforce with another’. A string of Northern firms and, as in the case of textiles, entire industries have relocated to the South to escape unionisation since the end of World War Two (p. 114).

And, while social-democratic governments in Europe were building sizeable welfare states in the aftermath of the War, social welfare was being privatised in the US. Unions negotiated with individual employers for health insurance and other so-called ‘fringe benefits’, rather than fighting for universal health care. As Lichtenstein writes, this ‘proved a strategic error of the first order, whose legacy plagues us yet’ (p. 126). The result, felt more fully today than during the 1950s, is institutionalised inequality in which health care and other benefits are job-dependent, leaving workers without coverage unless their employer offers them. Today, one in seven Americans – most of them working – have no health insurance whatsoever, while a much larger number lack adequate coverage.

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10 Moody 1988, p. 68.
11 Davis 1986, p. 102.
But, here, Lichtenstein’s analysis falters. He argues, ‘The most “exceptional” element in the American system of labor-management relations is the hostility managers have shown toward both the regulatory state and virtually all systems of worker representation’ (p. 105). Hostility toward unions and state regulation are hallmark traditions of the US ruling class. But *State of the Union* systematically downplays the consequences of the labour movement’s unswerving loyalty to the Democratic Party, one of the two main bourgeois political parties in the US. Time and again, Democrats have pledged to champion the interests of blacks, workers and the poor during political campaigns, and then proceeded to thumb their noses at them once in office.

**Labour and the Democratic Party**

Support for the Democratic Party has politically crippled the US labour movement time and again since the Great Depression. Lichtenstein is not entirely uncritical of the Democrats. Nevertheless, his narrative often tells only half the story, giving the impression that Democrats are far less beholden to ruling-class interests than they are in reality.

Lichtenstein quotes, for example Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s more fiery campaign speeches. In his 1936 re-election campaign, FDR made the accusation that the forces of ‘organized money are unanimous in their hatred for me, and I welcome their hatred’ (p. 46). But these statements give a false impression of Roosevelt’s actual class loyalties. Roosevelt granted the New-Deal reforms of the 1930s not to transform capitalist class relations, but to preserve them. Indeed, Roosevelt described himself as the ‘saviour’ of ‘the system of private profit and free enterprise’. The New Deal was part of a calculated move to capture the loyalty of the ascending labour movement for the Democratic Party. The CIO leadership was all too happy to deliver the working-class vote, as a bargaining chip to gain influence within the Roosevelt administration. Once the 1936 presidential election was out of the way, Roosevelt abandoned the rhetoric of class struggle. After ten workers were massacred by police during the Little Steel strike of 1937 in one of the bloodiest attacks in US labour history, Roosevelt’s only comment condemned both sides, quoting Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet: ‘A plague on both your houses!’

Similarly, Lichtenstein points out that Democratic President Harry Truman vetoed the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act. He does not mention, however, that Truman used Taft-Hartley twelve times to break strikes in its first year. Truman, whose first presidential act was to order that two atomic bombs be dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima

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14 Preis 1972, p. 70.  
15 Preis 1972, p. 353.
and Nagasaki, played a key role in curbing the postwar class struggle. During the gigantic strike wave of 1946, Truman used his authority under the War Powers Act to order government seizures of entire industries to combat strikes, successfully breaking strikes by oil workers, packinghouse workers, rail workers, and miners by the end of 1946.\textsuperscript{16} The labour movement nevertheless backed Truman when he ran for re-election in 1948.

The administration of President Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s barely receives a mention by Lichtenstein, yet Carter paved the way for Reagan’s more draconian measures. Carter, not Reagan, took the first stab at deregulation. In 1978, he signed legislation deregulating the airline industry, and in 1980 he began deregulating trucking. In 1978, Congress passed a tax reform bill cutting the top capital gains rate by more than 40 per cent, from 48 to 28 per cent. And Carter, who oversaw the Chrysler bailout, also did the advance planning for crushing the 1981 PATCO strike. Twelve months before the PATCO contract was set to expire, Carter created the Management Strike Contingency Force to run air traffic without the controllers were they to go on strike.\textsuperscript{17}

Lichtenstein is even more generous to President Bill Clinton, whose presidency marked a lurch to the right for the Democratic Party. Able to take the labour and black votes for granted, the strategy of the ‘New Democrats’ of the Clinton Administration revolved around fighting for ‘the political centre’ by beating the Republicans at their own game. This meant pushing through an economic programme that continued to widen class inequality throughout the 1990s economic boom and dismantling the welfare system for the poor, the last remaining legacy of the New Deal. But one would never guess this from Lichtenstein’s telling of recent history. Lichtenstein focuses instead on Clinton’s ill-fated attempt to develop a universal health insurance programme. To be sure, as Lichtenstein writes, ‘the plan would have generated a substantial rise in the social wage and taken a large step to reverse the growth in social inequality’ (p. 252). But he goes overboard when he argues that Clinton’s aims during his early presidency ‘were ideologically potent and socially useful efforts to give domestic politics a neo-Roosevelttian flavor’ (p. 251).

Clinton’s presidency marked the Democrats’ first successful attempt to break with the legacy of the New Deal – indeed, to eradicate its last remaining elements – not to resurrect it. Lichtenstein claims that Clinton rejected a single-payer Canadian-style health-care programme because he was won to labour’s view ‘that political and economic realism demanded that any health-care reform had to be built upon the existing system of employer-paid benefits’ (p. 252). But Clinton’s health-care programme failed precisely for this reason. Despite the fact that Democrats held a majority in both houses of Congress, his attempt to offer universal health care via the for-profit health-

\textsuperscript{16} Brecher, pp. 228–30; Preis, p. 258.
\textsuperscript{17} Smith 1992, p. 10.
care industry was a concept riddled with contradictions. Universal health care will only be won through a political and ideological battle that challenges the profiteers of medicine and the interests of the employers, not by pandering to them.

The trade-union bureaucracy

Lichtenstein argues for a return to union ‘militancy’ as a ‘strategic proposition’ for US labour today. He adds, ‘but even more important, American labor as a whole needs to stand behind those exemplary instances of class combat when and if they occur’. He continues, ‘The 1980s were a tragic decade for the unions, not because workers did not fight, but because when labor did take a stand . . . their struggles were both physically isolated and ideologically devalued’ (p. 273).

Yet Lichtenstein understates the active participation of the uppermost union leadership in curbing the class struggle and isolating those unionists who tried to wage a more militant fightback. He does not dwell on the fact that, after Reagan summarily fired 12,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981, the union leaders did nothing to build solidarity with the PATCO strikers. Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO (the main labour federation) sent out a letter to all AFL-CIO locals urging them not to stage a nationwide job action in solidarity with the strike.¹⁸

Labour leaders did organise a mass Solidarity Day rally in Washington during the strike in 1981, as Lichtenstein notes. Lichtenstein fails to note, however, that at the rally itself – which had been planned previously – the PATCO strike was barely mentioned from the front. Instead, speaker after speaker urged workers to vote Democrat in the next election.¹⁹

Lichtenstein does not entirely ignore the considerable differences between the top leadership and the rank and file. Indeed, he cites ‘union democracy’ as a second key to rebuilding the union movement today (pp. 274–5). He also contrasts the bloated size of the US union bureaucracy with those of Western European labour movements. ‘The US had sixty thousand full-time union officers in 1960, compared to just four thousand in Great Britain’. As he argues, much of this bureaucracy developed because in the US, ‘Unions are responsible for negotiating and administering not only wages and seniority systems’, but ‘pension benefits, health insurance, and various kinds of supplemental unemployment aid’ (pp. 143–4).

This is true, but the sheer size of its functionary apparatus has had long-standing consequences for US labour, which Lichtenstein does not explore. The US union bureaucracy, though not qualitatively different from labour bureaucracies elsewhere, has an exaggerated tendency to steer toward collaboration and away from confrontation.

Union leaders’ interests sharply diverged from the class interests of workers well before the onset of the employers’ offensive of the 1970s. This is obvious in the case of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Samuel Gompers, the AFL’s blow-hard president in the first decades of twentieth century, showed such disdain toward blacks and immigrants that he refused to allow them into segregated AFL unions. And AFL veteran George Meany – who led the AFL-CIO for its first twenty-five years – once bragged to the National Association of Manufacturers, ‘I never went on strike in my life, never ran a strike in my life, never ordered anyone else to run a strike in my life, never had anything to do with a picket line’. 20

The vast divergence of interests between the leadership and the rank and file is less obvious in the case of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Indeed, it has eluded – or been overlooked by – many a historian, Lichtenstein apparently among them. To be sure, the rise of industrial unionism in the 1930s represents the US working class’ greatest leap forward. John L. Lewis, the Mineworkers leader, spearheaded the formation of the CIO, in a firm break from the reactionary and exclusionary practices of craft unionism. UAW leader Walter Reuther, a former socialist, rose from the union ranks of the CIO during the Great Depression, later serving as vice-president of the CIO.

But if these and other CIO leaders played a crucial role in leading the advance of industrial unionism in the 1930s, they played an equally central role in beheading its rank-and-file leadership, undermining left-wing efforts to fight a class-wide battle. This process played out most dramatically during the McCarthy era of the 1950s. Yet Lichtenstein rushes to the defence of union leaders who negotiated contracts dismantling shop-floor rights, including the right to stop production over grievances that had been key weapons of union militants before the 1950s. Union leaders agreed to these measures, Lichtenstein explains,

not so much because they were ‘sellouts’, but because the bargaining structures that evolved after the war privileged across-the-board wage-and-benefit awards and devalued the localistic, individualized grievance issues that constituted the rationale for steward power and the daily routine of grievance arbitration. (p. 125)

**Politics**

Lichtenstein raises the issue of ‘politics’ as his third strategic proposition – in addition to ‘militancy’ and ‘union democracy’ – for the union movement to advance today.

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20 Preis 1964, p. 85.
But these appear as parallel, rather than intersecting, strategies. In reality, the fate of one is intertwined with the rest. If anything, politics is key in relation to the others. While conservatives and liberals alike accept one or another variation of the class status quo, those on the Left aim to challenge it. Unfortunately, Lichtenstein focuses his narrative almost exclusively on the conflicts within mainstream politics – examining the potential of nothing further to the left than liberalism.

Lichtenstein occasionally acknowledges the critical role of socialists and other radicals in building the union movement. As he says, ‘such radicals were and are essential to the organization of a trade union movement, in the United States even more so than in countries with an established socialist tradition’ (p. 45). But Lichtenstein seems to share little in common with the politics of those radicals – limiting his commentary to the broadest generalisations, as if further investigation is not warranted. He is also openly contemptuous of radicals of all stripes who offered a critique of the collaborationist character of the union bureaucracy during the 1970s and 1980s. The roster of radicals attacked by Lichtenstein includes Alice and Staughton Lynd, Stanley Arnowitz, Jeremy Brecher and Mike Davis (pp. 170–1). He attacks noted left-wing author Mike Davis, for example, for arguing that US unions were ‘abandoning the majority of the American working class’ in Prisoners of the American Dream – published a full fifteen years after George Meany commented that shrinking union membership ‘doesn’t make any difference’ to him (pp. 170–1, 129).

Lichtenstein shares the liberal view that social movements must aim to fit within the political mainstream to be successful. The underlying assumption is, of course, that mass consciousness cannot shift sharply to the left under changing circumstances. ‘All of America’s great reform movements, from the crusade against slavery onward, have defined themselves as champions of a moral and patriotic nationalism, which they counterposed to the parochial and selfish elites who stood athwart their vision of a virtuous society,’ he argues. ‘An essential element in the movement’s capacity to transform dissent and protest into majoritarian sentiment’, he adds is the ‘legitimation’ of a head of state (‘a Lincoln, a Roosevelt or a Johnson’) (pp. 34–5).

Having thus ruled out the potential for a radical transformation of society, Lichtenstein apparently assumes those already holding political power are the agents for social change, rather than a potential agency from below. In pushing the rank and file from the centre to the margins of labour history, he fails to explore how things might have gone differently had the Left been politically stronger. He therefore gives both the top union leaders and the Democrats far more credit than they deserve for serving the interests of rank-and-file workers, and leaves out some enormously important political struggles among rank-and-file workers over their future destiny.

In particular, State of the Union distorts the lessons of the most important era of class struggle over the last century – the Great Depression. The Depression era is crucial not only because of the strike wave that built the CIO, but because of the mass
radicalisation within the US working class, involving multiracial solidarity in a racially segregated society, that offered a glimpse of its revolutionary potential. That this radicalisation was curtailed and then reversed is the key to understanding labour’s backward slide in the decades that followed.

The CIO leadership virtually guaranteed Roosevelt’s continued popularity among workers, pumping a half-million dollars into his 1936 re-election campaign (p. 46). In 1936, the CIO created Labor’s Nonpartisan League, portrayed by its founders as a bold step in the direction of forming a labour party. But it was nothing of the kind. It was specifically organised to campaign for Roosevelt’s re-election. Thus, it placed the labour vote securely in the pocket of the Democratic Party.

The formation of a labour party is not a prerequisite for the labour movement to advance. But severing mass working-class loyalty to the Democrats is an absolute necessity. The CIO leadership did the opposite. Lichtenstein acknowledges that ‘labor-based political parties have been almost universal in the industrial West’. No labour party has ever developed in the US, he argues, ‘because the distinctive federalism of the US electoral system fatally penalizes those political/organisational gambits that stray too far beyond the two-party straightjacket’ (p. 275).

In actuality, a significant minority of US workers desired a labour party in the 1930s. A 1937 Gallup poll showed that at least 21 per cent of the population supported the formation of a national Farm-Labor Party as an alternative to the Democrats and Republicans.\textsuperscript{21} At the 1935 United Auto Workers’ (UAW) convention, delegates voted overwhelmingly to ‘actively support and give assistance to the formation of a National Farmer Labor Party’. \textit{After a heated debate, UAW delegates voted down a resolution supporting Roosevelt for President in the 1936 election}. This vote was reversed only after the CIO leadership threatened to withdraw all funding for the UAW to organise the auto industry unless the convention agreed to support Roosevelt for President.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus, as the class struggle peaked in the years 1935–7, a section of workers – including, significantly, within the militant UAW – sought a political alternative to the Democratic Party. While the pressure to support Roosevelt was enormous, the potential existed for this very brief time to build a working-class party to the left of the Democrats. But building such an alternative would have required a forceful left-wing leadership inside the working class movement.

At this decisive moment, the most sizeable left-wing influence within the labour movement was the Communist Party (CP).\textsuperscript{23} At the beginning of the Depression, the

\textsuperscript{21} Davis 1986, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{22} Chester 1985, pp. 68–9.
\textsuperscript{23} By the start of the Depression, Trotskyists were too few in number to wield significant influence nationally – although their brilliant execution of the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strike showed that they were up to the task of providing organisational and political leadership to the working-class movement.
CP claimed a membership of 7,500, growing to 82,000 by 1938.\textsuperscript{24} The CP had built a genuine base among industrial workers, containing within its membership many of the same shop-floor leaders from the strikes that built the CIO unions. In 1935, for example, Communist membership among auto workers numbered 630, nearly doubling to 1,100 in 1939 – with a much bigger periphery of sympathisers.\textsuperscript{25} In addition, the CP’s rank and file campaigned tirelessly against segregation and racism – including a decades-long struggle to free the Scottsboro Boys, nine young black men falsely accused of rape in Alabama. By the mid-1930s, the Communist Party’s black membership had grown to roughly nine per cent nationally, a small but significant first step toward building a multiracial working-class movement in the US.\textsuperscript{26}

But this promising opportunity to connect socialist politics to a rising working-class movement was squandered. By the mid-1930s, the CP was fully immersed in the Popular Front, throwing its full weight into uncritical support for both the CIO leadership and the Democratic Party. After spending the previous seven years of its wildly ultra-left Third Period denouncing Roosevelt and union leaders as social fascists, in 1934 the CP instructed its members to become virtually indistinguishable from them. The CP’s growth in size and influence among workers during the 1930s magnified the consequences of its misguided policies.

As the 1936 Presidential election approached, the CP did everything in its power to help ensure Roosevelt’s victory. Communists became loyal – if uninvited – members of Roosevelt’s New Deal Coalition. At the very same time that workers were becoming radicalised on a fairly wide scale, creating the potential for the creation of a mass workers’ party, the Communist Party effectively halted that process.

But the consequences of the popular front spread far beyond the electoral arena. Supporting Roosevelt’s New Deal Coalition had a devastating impact on the class struggle, because the CP now gave the top union officials in the CIO, including John L. Lewis, uncritical support. As a result, the Communist Party used its enormous influence inside the unions to lead the most militant sections of workers away from the forefront of the class struggle.

The General Motors sitdown strike by Flint Auto Workers in the winter of 1936–7 raised working-class confidence on a national scale. In 1937, the strike wave peaked. In the auto industry alone, there were 170 sit-down strikes against General Motors alone between March and June 1937. As the \textit{New York Times} observed, the auto workers ‘are as willing in some cases to defy their own leaders as their bosses’.\textsuperscript{27} The labour movement was poised to move from the defensive to the offensive.

\textsuperscript{24} Cochran 1977, pp. 4, 6; Klehr 1984, pp. 171–2, 366.
\textsuperscript{25} Keeran 1980, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{26} Draper 1986, p. 551; Klehr 1984, p. 348; Naison 1983.
\textsuperscript{27} Brecher 1972, p. 203.
But, as soon as the Flint sit-down strike was over, Lewis set out to rein in union militants, making it clear that the CIO would no longer tolerate unauthorised strikes. ‘A CIO contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs, or any other kind of strike’, he announced.28 The CP leadership made clear that its allegiance was to the New Deal Coalition, not to rank-and-file strikers. The CP’s *Daily Worker* declared ‘unequivocally and emphatically that the Communists and the Communist Party had never in the past and do not now in any shape, manner or form advocate or support unauthorized and wildcat action’.29

By late 1937, recession had set in once again. The monthly average of strikes fell by more than half between 1937–9.30 It was to be expected that Roosevelt would turn his back on workers, and that the CIO leadership would not lead a fight against Roosevelt. But, by the time workers learned this bitter lesson, the greatest upsurge in US working-class history was over.

There was a decisive missing element in the working-class movement of the 1930s: a political organisation committed to rank-and-file interests that was large enough to influence the course of the struggle. The Communist Party was large enough, but it had long since abandoned its commitment to the rank and file. In the eyes of the most militant workers, the Communist Party discredited itself when it turned its back on the class struggle at its turning point in 1937.

This political struggle *within* the working class is entirely absent from Lichtenstein’s lengthy discussion of the 1930s. He concludes that labour’s high point came to an end, not because the working-class movement was set back politically, but simply because of ‘furious opposition’ from ‘corporate adversaries, Southern Bourbons, craft unionists, and many elements of the New Deal coalition itself’ (p. 53).

**Class collaboration**

The political outcome of the class struggle during the Great Depression set the labour movement on a self-defeating course that has yet to be reversed. Since the Depression, the labour officialdom has remained firmly tied to the coat tails of the Democratic Party, never wavering from its fierce loyalty to the profit system and the pursuits of US imperialism. After US troops entered World War II in 1941, the spirit of co-operation between union and business leaders intensified. Within a matter of days, both AFL and CIO officials had agreed on a no-strike pledge for the duration of the War.

Once the War was over, the US government had no trouble enlisting union leaders as supporters of US imperialism in the Cold War, effectively blocking the possibility

28 Brecher 1972, p. 205; Chester 1985, p. 73.
30 Chester 1985, p. 90.
for international working-class solidarity for the second half of the twentieth century. This support included helping the CIA set up anti-Communist unions in countries all over the world. By 1985, the AFL-CIO had helped to set up anti-Communist unions in 83 different countries, costing 43 million dollars of union members’ dues money – more than its domestic budget.31

As the US government’s Cold-War hostility to the Soviet Union grew, so did its hostility toward Communism at home. The anti-Communist witch hunt enjoyed the active support of the same union leaders who went on to form the united AFL-CIO in 1955. Inside the unions, the CIO leadership conducted its own anti-Communist purge, as a mirror image of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In fact, union leaders such as UAW President Walter Reuther – who became vice president of the AFL-CIO when the two federations merged – worked with the HUAC to drive Communists and militants out of the unions. In 1952, Business Week observed, ‘[T]his week Reuther and [HUAC] were working together on the UAW like a well-rehearsed vaudeville team’.32

Between 1949 and 1950, the CIO convention expelled the eleven CP-led unions – more than 10 per cent of its membership. The anti-Communist purges gave way to a more lasting political conservatism on the part of CIO leaders, and laid the basis for furthering class collaboration in the postwar era. It is not a coincidence that McCarthyism ushered in a new era of labour-management relations. The witch hunts physically removed socialists and union militants alike from the unions, pushing radical politics to the fringes of the US working class. The consequences of this seismic political defeat were felt decades later, in the mid-1970s, when employers decided that they would no longer offer wage increases to, but instead demand drastic wage cuts from, unionised workers. By then, US workers had lost touch with the very tradition that had built the unions and felt they had no choice but to accept the lower wages negotiated by their leaders. The rank and file of the 1970s was in no position to wage the kind of class-wide fight back needed to stave off the employers’ offensive.

Oddly, in State of the Union, Lichtenstein dwells mainly on the immediate gains for the labour movement through its wartime alliance with US imperialism, arguing, ‘the necessity for strike-free production effort required that the Roosevelt Administration would ensure union growth during the years after Pearl Harbor’ (p. 56). He similarly shrugs off anti-Communism within the labour movement, implying its inevitability: ‘But when and if these early radicals built a successful union and recruited to its ranks the bulk of the workforce, then this union vanguard became a distinct political minority, thus giving rise to the conservative charges of a later day that radicals, and especially

31 Smith 1992, p. 25.
the Communists, had “infiltrated” the very unions in which they had played so decisive a founding role’ (p. 46).

Two decades ago, Lichtenstein understood the transforming character of the war and immediate postwar period on the labour movement. As he wrote in Labor’s War at Home,

[T]he expulsion of the Communist unions narrowed drastically the limits of internal political life within the union movement. As we have seen, the institutional pressures creating a bureaucratic style of union leadership had been powerfully advanced by support from the state’s labour relations apparatus during the war. By accepting the discipline of the Cold War mobilization, the industrial unions themselves advanced this process by identifying industrial radicalism with political subversion. Even in the UAW... the purge of Communists undermined the legitimacy of all opposition groups, Communist and anti-Stalinist alike, and inaugurated the reign of a one-party regime that co-opted or suppressed potential rivals.33

But, in State of the Union, McCarthyism serves as a mere detail, despite its far-reaching impact. Thus, although Lichtenstein longs for ‘militancy,’ ‘union democracy’, and even ‘politics’, he provides no clear path to reach these goals. His conclusion is, not surprisingly, a reassertion of the same political strategy that landed the US working-class movement in its present crisis. The best advice Lichtenstein can offer is, ‘[L]abor must function as an independent, and sometimes as a disloyal, component of the Democratic Party Coalition, at least until a reassessment of its political options can take place’ (p. 276). Lichtenstein continues to wish for miracles from the Democratic Party, when only breaking from this disastrous strategy and building a genuine political alternative can point the way forward for rank-and-file workers today.

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I actually agree with many of the arguments advanced by Sharon Smith in her review of *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, even when they are broached as an attack upon what she sees as some of the main themes in the book. I am not a masochist, mind you. Rather, I think her critique largely misplaced and beside the point. For better or worse, I was trying to advance a somewhat different argument about the fate of American unions, American workers, and the American Left. *State of the Union* is written from a perspective which tries to work out why the idea of an emancipatory labour movement once stood near the centre of American political culture, and why, across almost the entire existing US political spectrum, it no longer commands such interest or devotion. *State of the Union* is about how US progressives can move back to the future, back to an era, like that of mid-1930s, when the reconfiguration of American politics and social ideology was dialectically complicit with the rise of a mass union movement.

This is not to say that a bitter class conflict does not continue to dominate politics and production in North America; the ruling class does wage a one-sided class war against all those who exchange their labour for their livelihood. But my book argues that, in the years since the 1960s, neither the Left nor the liberals have been able to develop a language or a social movement that would enable us to put ‘the labour question’ back into political and ideological play. I argue that, since the 1960s, labour and class issues have been partially displaced by the still influential discourse spawned by the American civil rights movement. In most American workplaces, the ‘labour question’ has become a ‘rights question’, and it is precisely because of the hegemony enjoyed by such a rights talk – even George Bush has to offer a rhetorical bow to Martin Luther King and all his works – that ideas like class, solidarity, unionism, and collective action have been marginalised in the courts, the academy, and among the workers in those corporations, such as Burger King, Wal-Mart, and Microsoft, that a new labour movement must conquer if it is to flourish. This interplay between race and rights, between labour and the law, between ethnicity and whiteness, and between social cohesion and identity politics, constitutes a large proportion of the debate that now consumes the American Left and the more progressive sections of the labour movement. Smith ignores all this, which is why her review has a musty, antiquated flavour that makes it unhelpful in these current controversies. For the most part, Smith
is not interested in refuting the arguments that I do advance, but, instead, she wants to revisit a set of older polemics in order to pigeon-hole my work and reassert the validity of a somewhat shop-worn set of Trotskyist debating points.

Smith devotes a good deal of energy attacking American labour’s loyalty to the Democrats and my failure to condemn it. In a couple of previous books I did so, but in *State of the Union* I wanted to get at another issue: why and how did workers once think it reasonable, and indeed patriotic, to join a union in the first place? With the unionised proportion of the private-sector workforce now in single digits, this is the issue that confronts labour and the Left. It would be a good thing if we had a labour or progressive third party in the US, and it would certainly make for a more friendly organising climate, but even Smith asserts that ‘the formation of a labour party is not a prerequisite for the labour movement to advance’. In point of fact, I do spend an entire chapter in *State of the Union* explaining why a more politicised and politically independent trade-union movement achieved a partial reality in the 1940s and why even this degree of labour party-like activity was so bitterly opposed by conservatives, inside the Democratic Party, and without. In her outrage at the Democrats, and at the labour leaders who collaborated with that party, Smith relies heavily on the work of Art Preis, Jeremy Brecher, Eric Chester, and Mike Davis. These are all fine, spirited historians, but their work first appeared at a time when the existence of a mass union movement was taken for granted, when the law and the political culture still supported, if minimally, regulation trade unionism, inadequate as it might be. The key issue therefore was how might the unions be shifted to the Left, how they might move toward an agenda that actually challenged some essential features of mid-twentieth-century capitalism. Indeed, these were also some of the questions that I explored in my first book, *Labor’s War at Home: the CIO in World War II*, research for which I began during the heyday of the Berkeley New Left.

Unfortunately, we now live in an era when the very existence of a union movement is becoming all too problematic. So I tried to explain why unionism flourished in an earlier era, and not just among union militants and déclassé intellectuals. Smith takes pains to denounce the favourable comments I offer President Franklin Roosevelt for his sometime radical speeches, and she reminds us that, in June 1937, after the infamous Memorial Day massacre of ten unionists in Chicago, he left the labour movement in the lurch, and not for the last time.

Roosevelt’s two-facedness is hardly news, nor that of Abraham Lincoln when it came to slavery or John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson when civil rights were on the agenda. But Smith doggedly misses the point. It is not enough to condemn presidential hypocrisy and call it a day. These presidents were hypocritical about the insurgent movements of their time, in the same way that Bush remains hypocritical about diversity and racial justice today, because they are paying rhetorical tribute to a set of ideas and values that they cannot dismiss. Master broker that he was, FDR helped
legitimise a union movement in order to evoke a New-Deal army that he could deploy for his own (fractional) capitalist purposes. As a host of leftist historians, including Steve Fraser, Colin Gordon, Frances Fox Piven, Gary Gerstle, and Bryan Simon have demonstrated, it was precisely during such moments of division within the élite, when high prestige figures helped to legitimise insurgencies from below, that social-movement activists can make real progress and transform an incipient revolt into a potent, institutionalised expression of their power and ideas.

This is important when it comes to America’s contemporary union movement and its relationship to the potent rights discourse of our day. Smith misstates my view when she asserts that ‘Lichtenstein shares the liberal view that social movements must aim to fit within the political mainstream to be successful’. A fairer reading of my book – and of the work of a generation of radical social and cultural historians upon which I rely – would make clear that all insurgent movements legitimise themselves by appealing to commonly held values, languages, and political traditions. Eugene Debs demanded ‘industrial democracy’; Elizabeth Caddy Stanton sought ‘citizenship’ rights for women; and Martin Luther King called upon the federal government to enforce the ‘constitutional’ rights promised African-Americans nearly two centuries before. I therefore argue that unionists today need to take advantage of the legitimacy and legal standing inherent in the post-1960s civil rights laws and in the validation that even anti-union employers give to racial and gender justice. American workers understand they have ‘rights’. What they do not know is that it will take a union to give real life to that rights consciousness within the autocracy that is corporate America.

All this is complicated because the rise of the national rights discourse during the last forty years also helped devalue solidarity, class consciousness, and trade-union action. One cannot just assume an undifferentiated sense of class resentment, no matter how exploitative the ruling élite. In the 1930s, as well as in our own time, the working class has been internally divided. Indeed, a form of identity politics has been instrumental to the labour movement in the 1930s as well as in post-60s America. Today, unionists who are actually organising workers in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami and New York are highly sophisticated about the nation’s ethnic and racial heterogeneity, and they are aware that mere appeals to class solidarity, important as they can be, will get you nowhere when workers have no tradition or understanding of its meaning.

This brings us to the sorry state of American trade-union leadership, for which Smith sees me as a clever apologist. In State of the Union and elsewhere, I have tried to fathom why for decade after decade, the American trade-union leadership has been so retrograde, bureaucratic and class collaborationist. It is not enough to breathlessly decry such crimes and call for a rank-and-file revolt, because there is obviously something structural going on within the American political economy and within the system of collective bargaining that generates, generation after generation, such a
leadership. I think one of the reasons for this state of affairs is the very institution of collective bargaining, as codified both in the labour law and in corporate practice. Firm- or industry-centred collective bargaining generates collaborationist union leaders and, given enough time and enough defeats, parochially-minded workers. When I therefore say that it is not enough to blame union ‘sell-outs’ for the management offensive, Smith seems to think I am rushing to the defence of these figures. But a truly radical analysis of American unionism has to explain why, with some notable exceptions, we have been saddled with the Meanys and Hoffas and Kirklands, and yes, the Reuthers too.

Two final points: Smith writes as if I had never heard of McCarthyism or of those within the union movement who deployed red-baiting against their enemies. *State of the Union* does not dwell on this union civil war because the Left has for too long used these McCarthyite crimes as a blanket explanation for the sad state of the unions in subsequent decades. As I detailed at some length in my 1995 biography of Walter Reuther, his assault on the Communists weakened both democracy and the progressive agenda within the UAW and labour movement in general, with consequences that would reach far into the future. Indeed, any historical event casts a long shadow forward, but at a certain point other causal influences come into play. The pitiful state of the UAW today – its inability to organise the auto parts sector for example – is a product of much more than Reuther’s fifty-year old failure to live up to the civil-libertarian and democratic principles he so frequently enunciated. The current generation of American unionists, whatever their other faults, can no longer be tarred with the burdens generated by those mid-century conflicts.

And, finally, Smith muddles my argument when she rushes to the defence of the generation of New-Leftists who themselves once repudiated the very idea of a trade-union movement. *State of the Union* devotes much space to those intellectuals, liberal, left, and New-Left, who abandoned the idea that an organised working class could become a lever to transform society, even abandoned the idea that the unions were a necessary defence of working class dignity and living standards. We need not dwell on the views of Daniel Bell and Clark Kerr, but when I reread the work of Stanley Arnowitz, Jeremy Brecher, Staunton Lynd, and Mike Davis, I was surprised by the extent to which they applied the sins of George Meany to that of the union movement as a whole – indeed, to the very idea of trade unionism. Early in the 1970s, Arnowitz advanced the then fashionable view that the unions are ‘chiefly a force for integrating the workers into the corporate capitalist system’, while, a decade later, Davis wrote off the labour movement as so ‘blinkered’ in its defence of existing employment privileges as to be essentially irredeemable. Among the most insular and reactionary unions of this sort was the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, a craft union that endorsed Ronald Reagan for President, recruited from the military services, and avoided alliances with other unions, at least until Reagan broke their strike in
August 1981. In fact, the unions that suffered the gravest assaults during the 1980s, in terms of membership losses and declining economic leverage, were George Meany’s own building and construction trades. The point here is not to rehabilitate Meany and his ilk, but to make clear that, in an era when the very existence of the American union movement is at stake, the unions, by their very functioning, remain a bone in the capitalist throat, and a vehicle, under a different set of leaders, for the necessary counterattack. Liberals and leftists in the US have often wilfully forgotten this fact, and *State of the Union* was designed to show why they were wrong and how they can begin the ideological and political work necessary to correct their misapprehension.