WHY IS THERE NO SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES?

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Why is there no socialism in the United States? The question may be old, but it is one made new for each generation. Posed in this form, it was the title of a 1906 book by German sociologist Werner Sombart. Now, three major periods of radical upheaval later, it remains timely. Partly this is because it is a more general question than the word "socialism" might indicate, broader even than the fuzzier notion of "radicalism." The question really implies an inquiry into the nature of U.S. history and society -- not just social, political and economic arrangements, but also into that elusive but significant area of "consciousness," which includes values, life-goals, allegiance and self-definition of individuals and groups.

To ask the question is to assume Karl Marx was on to something when he pointed to class struggle as the engine of history and advanced capitalist orders as most ripe for socialism. To attempt to answer it is not just to admit that Marx was wrong -- after all, Marxist revolution has come only to underdeveloped
countries -- but to explain why he was so far wide of the mark with regards to the United States. Certainly America spawns radical movements, but here there has been the least class consciousness, the greatest discontinuities between generations of radicals, the most conservative labor unions, and the weakest socialist parties of any highly industrialized nation.

Over the years Sombart's query has been answered in different ways. These sort themselves into two categories: (1) American "exceptionalism," and (2) the internal problems and/or intellectual weakness of radical groups. The first camp is by far the most extensive, and Sombart was a member. "Exceptionalism" means that the U.S. has somehow escaped the pattern of development shared by other industrial societies. For Sombart it was the rising standard of living, fluid class lines, open frontier and franchise which served to prevent the radicalization of the working class. (Once he put it simply: "All socialist utopias have come to grief on roast beef and apple pie.") With varying degrees of sophistication, this argument has been advanced by many scholars. Perhaps the most significant addition to it was Louis Hartz's notion (The Liberal Tradition in America, 1955) that class consciousness and socialism in Europe grew out of a feudal tradition which was wholly absent in the U.S. The second approach has been implicit in studies of individual movements -- Socialist Party, Communist Party, IWW or New Left -- where divisiveness and factionalism are bound to loom large. Here one might also place Daniel Bell's influential essay,
"The Development of Marxian Socialism in the United States," (in Stow Persons and Donald Drew Egbert, Socialism and American Life, 1952) best remembered for its charge that the SP was "in, but not of this world," that radical movements never faced the real problems of American life, but had their eyes focused upon messianic utopian goals.

Despite a gap in the literature, no scholar has yet attempted a history of radicalism that spans two hundred years of American experience. Indeed, until recently even broad approaches to the Left in this century have been nonexistent. But now, evidently prodded by the activism of the sixties, historians have begun to fill this vacuum. First came John P. Diggins' The American Left in the Twentieth Century (1973), which interpreted radicalism "as an intellectual and cultural phenomenon" (vii) and dealt with the leaders and ideas of three generations, the Lyrical, the Old and the New Left. This was followed by James Weinstein's The Ambiguous Legacy: The Left in American Politics (1975), a work which combined scholarship and polemic, gave less emphasis to individuals than did Diggins and focused more upon the changing nature of corporate society. Now Milton Cantor has produced a volume which clearly builds upon the research of many recent specialized studies and biographies, acknowledges the insights of Weinstein and Diggins, and yet has its own distinctive point of view.

Cantor incorporates both explanations for the failure of the Left, with "exceptionalism" seen as by far the more important.
But this is "exceptionalism" with a difference. The chief "obstacle to radical dreams for a socialist society" has not been the actual accomplishments of American capitalism, but "the bourgeois mentality of much of American labor." (6) This mentality is no mere reflection of rising wages or social mobility; rather, it is what Marx called a "false consciousness." By accepting the American dream, the "land of opportunity" mystique, workers have been blinded to "any realistic appreciations of the inegalitarian and class nature of the society." (8) The values shared by industrialists and workers and alike achieved what Antonio Gramsci called "hegemony" over American institutions -- unions, schools, churches -- and over the "values, attitudes, beliefs and morality -- which comprised consciousness." (7) One result is that grievances against "the established social order" can only be conceived "in terms supplied by that order." (9) This has meant electoral politics, reform movements and trade union activity.

In such a situation the problem for radicals is -- as Lenin would argue -- to demystify the ideology, to transform the consciousness of workers by showing how the ideas of Americanism have served to mask their exploitation, to turn them from faith in the system to a readiness to abolish it. American Leftists disagreed over how to achieve this end, and Cantor sees them as taking two opposing positions -- "impossibilism" and "immediatism." The former meant maintaining faith in the "revolutionary nature of the working class," proclaiming that capitalism could not be reformed, keeping
labor from seeking improvements within the competitive system, eschewing electoral politics and preaching straight socialism rather than accepting short-term goals. In the U.S. it also seemed to mean isolation from the working class. Those groups which maintained their doctrinal purity — Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Part and a half dozen Trotskyist groups — have been among the smallest and most ineffectual of radical organizations.

Daniel Bell to the contrary, Cantor maintains that "impossibilism" was not the dominant strain on the Left. Much more common was "immediatism," which implied a gradual road to socialism. Most radicals could not simply take comfort in the eventual revolution — they wanted to help suffering people now, and so they worked inside labor unions, organized the unemployed or the powerless in urban ghettos and took part in electoral politics. In doing so, they had to stress limited goals and de-emphasize "socialist ideology and objectives," with the result that they often sounded little different from reformers. This was the path advocated by German revisionist Eduard Bernstein — "the movement is everything, the ends are nothing" — but Cantor sees it as one in which the means corrupted the ends. Opportunism flourished and winning elections or strikes became more important than raising "class consciousness" or preparing for socialism. Yet just this approach underlay the real, if temporary, successes of the century's most important radical movements — the SP and the IWW before World War One, the CP in the thirties and forties and the New Left in the sixties.
Tension between adherents of these two positions divided Left groups all through this century and led to frequent schisms. Cantor judges the "immediatists" as shortsighted and mistaken, but he also shows no faith that "impossibilism" could have dented "hegemony." So it is with a kind of "damned if you do, damned if you don't" outlook, a vicious double-bind, that he details the story of twentieth century radicalism, follows the rise and decline of major organizations and finds room to describe the fortunes of splinter groups. Sharing with Diggins an interest in "culture radicalism," he also examines the Leftist proclivities of poets and artists from the playful radicalism of the teens to the infatuation with communism in the thirties to the gaudy counter culture of the sixties. For creative people the problem was less one of means and ends than that of the tension between political positions and the demands of artistic expression. What Cantor says of this dilemma for the Lyrical Left might refer to all -- culture radicals were forced to "compartmentalize their ideas -- placing political commitments in one box and views on the function of culture in another." (49)

Since much of the ground covered in *The Divided Left* is familiar, Cantor's main contribution is the unrelenting insistence on the theme of "immediatism." No summary of all his evidence is possible, but a few examples can show how it was -- in his view -- a self-defeating strategy. Take the SP at its high point in 1912, when Eugene V. Debs received six percent of the Presidential vote
and 1200 socialists -- including 56 mayors and aldermen -- were elected to office. This could only happen because the SP had become, in Leon Trotsky's words, a "party of dentists." The remarkable decade-long growth towards this apparent triumph had been built on immediatist goals that attracted a reformist constituency, while a vague "revolutionary patina" was confined to the ritual platform and voiced by a tiny minority within the SP. The irony was that electoral victories were a losing game. Socialists in office might sponsor "municipal ownership of utilities, improved sanitation, adequate school facilities, (and) free textbooks," (29) but this in no way distinguished them from Progressives or brought socialism nearer.

The SP might be tame, but surely the IWW, CP and New Left were ready for the barricades. Not so, says Cantor. The rhetoric of the IWW -- with its calls for class war, sabotage and "propaganda of the deed" -- might be violent, but it was a labor union after all, and in strike situations leaders like Bill Haywood sought union contracts and negotiated responsibly over wages and hours. This meant that even a success like that at Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1913, was limited. Workers were attracted only by the union's ability to improve their condition and they dropped out when strikes were over. Thus, because the Wobblies neglected to explicate their vision of the "cooperative commonwealth," they left behind no "permanently radicalized constituency or labor organization." (39) Similar problems dogged the CP, born out of the Left Wing of the SP
just after the Bolshevik Revolution in the belief that a similar upheaval in the U.S. was near. In some periods the CP was a tiny, purist group, and respectability came only during the Popular Front of the late thirties and then again during the Second World War. The cost was the surrender of "revolutionary goals" and "its identity as an independent political force." (118) By supporting the New Deal, helping to organize the CIO and keep workers from striking during the war, party leaders dug their own grave. For when politicians and unions turned against communism in Cold War years, there was no class conscious rank-and-file to defend them. As for the New Left, it was different from former groups in that it was largely based on students, was closer to romantic anarchism than socialism, and -- for most of its brief history -- cared more for the personal authenticity of action than for ideas. Its goals such as ending the Vietnam War or organizing the poor were thus easily coopted by government programs or defused by reform leaders like Gene McCarthy or George McGovern.

While some might cheer the accomplishments of radical groups, *The Divided Left* argues that any successes were worse than illusory -- for the cause of socialism they were counterproductive. The idea is that anything that humanized the system has also strengthened it. For example, municipal reform in the Progressive era made a contribution to social stability that "hastened the acceptance of the business civilization and confirmed the beneficence of its values." (29) Similarly, to organize successful unions was to
integrate workers into the capitalist system and contribute to "working-class acceptance of a consumer-oriented, middle-class culture." Ultimately, then, the "irony of the radical experience in America" was that whatever small successes radicals achieved only helped to strengthen "the class system and dominant values of the society." (40)

This argument is hardly original. Much of it is voiced in Weinstein and supported by works such as Melvin Dubofsky's We Shall Be All (1969), with its assertion that radicals "acted as midwives at the birth of the 'welfare state.'" (484) Any assessment of its truth or falsity is bound to result in what philosophers call a "nonterminating argument," one obviously dependent upon individual values. A major issue involved is the truth of Gramsci's notion of hegemony -- that is, "to what degree was the prevailing ideology socialized within the work force and embraced by it?" (8) This raises the question of whether an "impossibilist" position might ultimately have taken the Left farther along the road towards socialism -- as Weinstein asserts -- or whether Cantor is correct in claiming that hopelessness of both approaches? Like other studies, The Divided Left concentrates on the strategy of leaders and the author admits that the broader question can only be answered "by a direct investigation of working class attitudes and behavior." (9)

Such a study would return us to that realm of "consciousness" which is so central to histories of radicalism. Not only does it help to structure the past but it also underlies assessments of future
developments. Here the three recent surveys differ considerably; Weinstein, hoping to tear away the veils of hegemony to include "industrial workers as a . . . part of the new socialist party" (170); Diggins, wondering if the Left can absorb the challenge of the counter culture, "a new consciousness that seeks not so much to realize but to obliterate the western ideal of consciousness" (195); and Cantor, foreseeing no change in consciousness because the "economic, political, social and ideological factors (that) shaped a non-revolutionary society . . . are still operative." (227)

One way to approach such disagreements and to answer the question posed by Sombart might be to investigate more closely the notion of "consciousness" itself. As usually used in the term "class consciousness" it is a sociological and economic notion that can seem crude and simplistic to anyone familiar with the traditions of Freudian or developmental psychology -- after all, it assumes a kind of class loyalty without exploring the dynamic matrix of the family in which personalities develop and values are internalized. To understand if and how it actually exists within individuals and groups, one could call on the methodologies and insights from the growing field of psychohistory. Perhaps studies of the family could serve to reveal why workers have identified themselves with middle class Americans rather than as a "proletarist." Similarly, psychobiographical analysis might explain why -- assuming Cantor is correct -- American leaders were so disposed towards "immediatism." Comparisons with the European Left would also be helpful, for the
struggle between the two positions has also occurred there, the difference evidently being that "impossibilists" have had a somewhat greater constituency and workers have more readily identified themselves in terms of class. Ultimately, one can commend Cantor's book as an intelligent, useful analysis that takes its place along side the works of Diggins and Weinstein. All three are must reading for those interested in the American Left, together, they bring us as far along the road towards understanding as conventional or Marxist history can. Now it is possible that a different approach to the problem of belief structures and individual and group identity might take us even farther.