

Historiography of American Socialism

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ABSTRACT: The failure of American Socialism has been a subject that historians of labor and the left have been writing about for many decades. Ira Kipnis, James Weinstein, John Laslett, and Mari Jo Buhle bring sharply different perspectives to this problem and the ways in which class, gender, labor politics, ethnicity, and factionalism framed the rise and decline of American socialism in the years between 1870 and 1920. The paper compares the way in which these four historians see the role of socialism in American life.

KEYWORDS: American socialism, American exceptionalism, progressive movements, Wilsonian liberalism, Historiography

The question, “Why there is no socialism in the US” has been a fulcrum of study of historians of labor and the left. Some scholars argued that Americans, who were “born equal” did not need to resort to socialism, maintaining American exceptionalism. Others claimed that the internal failure of the Socialist Party was a catalyst for its decline. By revisiting the question of American socialism, this paper analyzes the ways in which class, gender, labor politics, ethnicity, and factionalism framed the rise and decline of American socialism in the years between 1870 and 1920 by comparing the works by Ira Kipnis, James Weinstein, John Laslett, and Mari Jo Buhle. These scholars approached the question of socialism in the US and provided contesting analyses on the rise and decline of American socialism.

Scholars such as Ira Kipnis argued that the early achievement of liberal democracy impeded the development of class consciousness and made a revolution for an egalitarian society less relevant in the United States. Maintaining American exceptionalism, Kipnis insisted that socialism was difficult to take roots in the “born equal” America. In *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912*, Kipnis described that European immigrants brought utopian socialism, but it failed to take roots in America because “Free elections, free speech, and a free press cloaked government strike-breaking and business subsided. And it was difficult for the socialists to expose the ‘capitalist state’ as nothing but an instrument of the bourgeoisie when every male adult had the theoretical right to participate in the election of government officials.”¹

¹ John H. M. Laslett, *Labor and the left: a study of socialist and radical influences in the American labor movement, 1881-1924* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 4.

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Despite the declaration of such liberal democratic principles, the social equality fell far short of the ideal of American democracy. The American society was not exceptional to other industrial societies in the world. It experienced a number of economic and social malaises caused by industrialization. Class stratification in industrializing America was as apparent as that of other societies who were going through similar capitalist development and social changes associated with it. Thus, it seems more plausible to argue that the American socialist movement grew out of *American* experience, yet the question remains that whether the liberal democratic principles enshrined in US Constitution could function as an impediment for collective class consciousness. Kipnis and other scholars who supported this American exceptionalist view of the political development of the United States, furthermore, need to recognize that democracy and liberalism were not monolithic but a contented ideological terrain throughout the history of the United States.

Yet, this is not to gainsay the influence of socialist thought originated in the Old World on American political culture. On the question whether socialism was European or grew out of American experiences, it seems that American socialism was synthesis of both European and American common experiences resulted from rapid industrialization of the West. Mari Jo Buhle successfully demonstrated that both German immigrants and American women faced common capitalist enemy and gender repression, developing a common vision for alternative social values.

Laslett challenged exceptionalist views espoused by Kipnis and argued that socialism was not irrelevant to the American society. Capitalism in America, like in any other capitalist societies, produced class antagonism. Laslett wrote, "Both the rise and the decline of socialist influence in the labor movement derived far more from indigenous factors arising out of the nature of American society and industry than has hitherto been supposed."² Indeed, American society was not immune to challenge of a class-based mass movement. Laslett successfully challenged the monolithic and conservative image of the American working class by showing that the workplaces in America could bring about a radical labor socialism. According to Laslett, American socialists achieved their greatest degree of penetration in the labor movement between 1881 and 1924. Rapid industrialization and the destruction of traditional crafts following the Civil War were significant factors that prompted workers to engage in political activism and labor militancy. Socialists were able to exploit the zeal. This does not mean; however, the class consciousness of workers was the basis of the labor solidarity. American industries were by and large divided along ethnic lines. Garment industry, for instance, was heavily occupied by Jewish workers and the brewery was by German immigrants. The ethnic and racial divides and native- foreign born distinctions at workplaces remained important among workers. While Laslett successfully disproved American exceptionalist claims by showing the success of socialist penetration in the American labor movement, he failed to answer whether American workers could achieve class solidarity by overcoming race, ethnic and gender differences.

In his study of the decline of socialism in the US, Laslett's concluded that America's two-party system and Wilsonian reformism undermined labor unions'

² Ibid., 297.

predisposition to support socialism. Laslett insisted that Socialism was not irreverent to America, but the two-party system placed structural obstacles for a third party like the Socialist Party to enter the mainstream political competition. As a result, Laslett argued, "Once Woodrow Wilson has been elected and had begun to enact the series of social reforms for which his first administration became famous., virtually all the unions considered in this sample began immediately to turn away from their earlier political support of the Socialist party and to align themselves with the Democrats."³ Laslett maintained that even though socialists successfully won the support of the American labor movement, American workers failed to establish labor politics because of their voluntary assimilation into the hegemonic capitalist values and system. Laslett supported his argument by providing the example of Boot and Shoe Workers Union that accepted the Union Stamp Contract, moving toward cooperation with management. This resulted in the erosion of radical influence on the labor politics in the US. Laslett claimed that American liberal capitalism successfully generated pressure toward conformity to the hegemonic values of America on workers.

Both Kipnis and Laslett viewed the decline of American socialism came with the rise of Wilsonian reformism during the period between 1913 and 1919. According to these scholars, the social reforms initiated by Wilson made the Democratic and moderate socialism less distinguishable. Yet, James Weinstein disagreed with the idea and insisted that Wilsonian reformism did not erode popular support for the Socialist Party since the party's decline in fact occurred after 1925. Weinstein argued that the liberal progressives did not lured labor's support from the Socialist Party, but internal factionalism led to the eventual decline of the Socialist party. Weinstein demonstrated that the real decline of the Socialist Party began when the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia gave the birth of radical "left" within the Socialist Party in the US. In the 1920s, the irrevocable factionalism within the Socialist Party led to the creation of Socialists, Communists, Laborites and Farmer-Laborites, putting an end to a mass socialist movement in the United States. Unlike Kipnis and Laslett who framed their studies within American political contexts, Weinstein expanded the scope of analysis and viewed the American socialist movement as a part of the larger international socialist movement of the early 20th century.

Weinstein's study made a significant contribution not only by pointing out the time gap between the rise of Wilsonian reformist movement and the decline of the Socialist party, but also by demonstrating that the nature of decline was ideological. Weinstein argued that socialism still had a mass appeal in the period between 1919 and 1925, but the emergence of revolutionary Communists made the socialist movement a "narrow, sectarian, and dominated by the theoretical and ideological disputes."⁴ While Kipnis interpreted the internal factionalism of the Socialist Party as the phenomenon resulted from the Wilsonian progressive movement that had lured the Right-Center socialists to adopt the liberal capitalist reforms, Weinstein showed that it was not one side leaving socialism, but all sides

³ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁴ James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 104.

were engaging in ideological disputes over conflicting visions for *socialist movement*. Weinstein's study implied that it was not lack of socialist ideology, but the excess of uncompromising ideological disputes that brought the decline of the Socialist Party in the US.

Their different interpretations of the failure of American socialism also emanate from their contesting views on "the socialist movement" itself. Scholars who support the idea that there was no successful socialism in American tend to employ a narrow Eurocentric definition of socialism. For both Kipnis and Laslett, socialism was nothing beyond a political ideology. Kipnis held the idea that socialism was a foreign ideology and ended with the rise of the powerful liberal ideology advanced by Wilsonian reforms. Kipnis saw the socialist movement as tantamount to the Socialist Party, thus his study narrowly focused on the party leadership and electoral performances of the Socialist Party. Laslett defined socialism as "a broad range of political ideologies ranging from a Populistic form of evolutionary socialism on the right to DeLeonite impossibilism and Communism on the left."⁵ Laslett viewed the socialist movement as basically a labor movement, focusing on the revolutionary subjectivity of the unionized workers defined by Karl Marx. Both Kipnis and Laslett failed to account the American socialist movement as a whole, excluding the activities sustained by the rank-and-file members.

On the other hand, Weinstein more broadly defined socialism as dissent against the hegemonic capitalist values and system. Weinstein's study also focused on the party politics of the socialists, but it maintained that the socialist movement as a broader political and social movement. Publishing his work, *Decline of Socialism in America* in 1969, Weinstein interpreted the socialist movement as something similar to the New Left movement of the 1960s. He argued that these movements were not merely an ideologically united political movement, but it was also a popular struggle that addressed social problems. Weinstein thus defined the socialist movement as a protest movement that was a "broadly based deeply rooted, self-conscious movement for socialism in the United States."⁶ For Weinstein, the socialist movement in the years between 1870 and 1920 was an "ideologically unified by a commitment to a socialist reorganization of society as the solution to the inequalities and corrupting social values it believed were inherent in American capitalism."⁷ Such insight is important since, arguably, in the process of achieving the revolutionary Marxian goals, the Left in the United States historically addressed social and cultural problems, including the issues of race and gender, which the New Left made fulcrum of their politics.

Defining the socialist movement as a both political and social movement allowed Weinstein to challenge the view that socialism was ideologically defeated by the American liberal capitalism. He differentiated a political movement of the Socialist Party and a broader social movement of socialism. He argued that the socialist movement failed politically but made significant contributions as a broad social movement that demanded a series of progressive social changes. According to

⁵ Laslett, 6.

⁶ Weinstein, viii.

⁷ Ibid., ix.

Weinstein, the socialist rank-and-file members raised important questions regarding women and racial minorities. While the leadership could not mobilize itself for such causes, fearing the damage to the purity of class struggle, rank-and-file members played a crucial role in addressing gender and race problems in the US. Weinstein insisted that Wilsonian liberalism was not the main cause of the socialist defeat, but the left wing of the Socialist Party eroded the party unity and invited the eventual disintegration. In this way, the socialist movement was a struggle for an egalitarian society, the rank-and-file communists made similar contributions by addressing importance of interracial solidarity and racial equality in places like Harlem. The Communists too was a positive force at grass root level.

Like Weinstein who viewed the socialist movement as a struggle for an egalitarian society, Mari Jo Buhle interpreted the Socialist women at the turn of the century as the vanguard of women's movement. In *Women and American Socialism*, Buhle argued that the Socialist movement allowed American women to make social contributions during the period when women's participation in the public sphere was limited. Socialist women such as Anna A. Naley and Caroline Lower played important public roles by providing educational service to its members, distributing leaflets, and establishing a network of women to take care children whose parents were at strikes. Despite their significant contributions, the Socialist Party eventually abolished the Women's National Committee, fearing the women's cause would pollute class purity of the Socialist movement. Even though their activities met such resistance from male members, the women of the Socialist Party were the first to announce "women's' question." Buhle's study showed that women gained the opportunities to problematize and address gender inequality through their participation in the Social Party activities. Buhle argues, "Only in the 1960s did their [the early 1900s Socialist women's] legacy have perceived historical significance" and it was the task of women of the New Left movement to finish the unfinished job started by the Socialist women.⁸ Buhle is not concerned of proving a historical continuity between the Socialist women and the new women's movement of the 60s, but, her main contention was that the Socialist movement at the turn of the century was not just about class struggle but a social and political movement for an egalitarian social order.

Buhle not only departed from a narrow political and ideological definition of the socialist movement but also disinterred hidden historical actors who played significant roles, such as women who were also critical of the problems associated with capitalist society. This led Buhle to reach a different conclusion. While Kipnis and Laslett who only saw workers as the subjectivity of a social movement saw the failure of labor activism as tantamount to that of the socialist movement as a whole, Buhle concluded that socialist women successfully advanced women's causes into the mainstream, starting from the grass roots movement despite the failure of the socialist movement in the US to achieve the Marxian revolutionary goal. Buhle argues that capitalism was not only about exploitation of working class but also repression of women and defense of traditional limited women's gender role, thus

⁸ Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 323.

she argued that the gender role and women's cultural experiences gave the rise of collective consciousness and led to successful political actions. Thus, for Buhle the socialist movement was not a dead movement of the past, but its values and legacies resonated across generations. By defining the socialist movement broadly, Buhle and Weinstein provided counterarguments to the idea that assumed the "failure" of American socialism. It could be concluded that the socialist movement failed as a political force, but it had functioned as a social and cultural force that addressed issues such as gender and race.

Ira Kipnis, James Weinstein, John Laslett, and Mari Jo Buhle approached the history of the Socialist movement in the past in different ways. Maintaining American exceptionalism, Kipnis explained the failure of American socialism through European immigrants' failure to Americanize European socialist ideology and the lure of Wilsonian liberalism. Laslett challenges such an exceptionalist view by focusing on the radical workers that existed within the labor movement. For both Kipnis and Laslett, the success of American liberal ideology made it difficult for socialism to flourish in the US.

American exceptionalist school shadows common experiences of European and American workers that caused by equally intense capitalist industrialization since it places excessive emphasis on the distinctive qualities of the American society and founding ideologies. That the United States was "born free and equal" did not mean that American workers enjoyed more egalitarian society in practice, compared to workers in other countries. The decline of socialism could not be explained solely by the lure of Wilsonian liberalism, but international affairs and factionalism of the Socialist Party should be considered as well. Weinstein pointed out that the decline of the socialist movement was not caused by Wilsonian progressive movement by taking international affairs into account. His study furthermore casts a doubt on the assumption that there was no socialism in the US. Weinstein and Buhle more convincingly demonstrated that the socialist movement was not merely a class struggle, but it was a successful progressive movement that challenged existing social values.

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