

Labour
Journal of Canadian Labour Studies
Le Travail
Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



Left Marginalia **The Radical Imagination in Postwar America**

Michael Dennis

Volume 80, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041971ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Dennis, M. (2017). Left Marginalia: The Radical Imagination in Postwar America. *Labour / Le Travail*, 80, 273–288.

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Left Marginalia: The Radical Imagination in Postwar America

Michael Dennis

Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

IN AN ERA THAT HAS WITNESSED the disappearance of any effective counterweight to the power of international capital, historians Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps have written a persuasive reminder of an American left tradition that once offered more than the audacity of hope. Occupying the “margins” while contending for the “mainstream,”¹ activists from across the race, gender, and ideological spectrum drew inspiration from the revolutionary and abolitionist examples of the 19th century. What they sought was a fundamentally more democratic and egalitarian society than anything imagined by the self-proclaimed defenders of American liberty. Using a variety of tactics and political formations, socialists, feminists, Black nationalists, and environmentalists advanced at various points the goals of individual liberation and social equality. Registering the frustration of the left in the post-Great Recession miasma, the authors argue that the left has moved closest to the mainstream when it privileged coalition building over vanguard heroics. The left alternative has been most persuasive when it merged the dual impulses of personal freedom and economic justice.

One of the many virtues of *Radicals in America* is that it postulates a coherent definition of American radicalism. “What makes left-wing criticism radical,” they argue, “is the conviction that freedom, equality, democracy, and solidarity will demand changing the existing order of social life in fundamental ways,” displacing the power of concentrated capital and fashioning “new egalitarian

1. Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7–8.

ways of social interaction and political engagement.”² Acknowledging the left’s many contradictions and hypocrisies, Brick and Phelps succeed in demonstrating the persistence of these principles throughout most of the postwar period. Equally important, they have decisively demolished the image of the American left as one dominated by the aspirations of the white male wage worker or student radical. This is an ambitious history of American radicalism in which women, gays, lesbians, and racial minorities are more than bit players in a larger drama of the White Working Class. It’s also a history that looks skeptically on the claim that the trade union represents the principal agent of working-class emancipation.

From its origins in the abolitionist movement, Brick and Phelps argue, the American left has occupied a position of marginality from which it has critiqued a nation invested in the maintenance of hierarchies that violated human dignity. At its best, the left has called on American society to resolve its contradictions and restructure its institutions so that a “future society governed by self-determination and cooperation” would be possible.³ Radicals had to negotiate a “dialectic” or “tension between two commitments: the willingness to hold fast for a minority view and the struggle to imagine and help fashion a new majority.”⁴ While the authors focus on the period after 1945, they understand the longer tradition to which postwar dissent belongs as well as the political and ideological forces that shaped it. They also use it as a foil against a contemporary left that frequently fails to offer anything more than shrill self-righteousness or apocalyptic doomsday scenarios.

In the authors’ estimation, abolitionist Wendell Phillips best exemplified the radical tradition of occupying the outer perimeter while struggling to influence the wider society. A “principled oppositionist,” Phillips became the target of repression even while he maintained his confidence that most people possessed redeeming qualities. Phillips’ philosophy “rested on a deep belief in the cause of democracy,” since he sincerely believed that the majority could be persuaded to embrace the democratic principles it *already* held, but which “prejudice or indifference,” as Phillips put it, prevented them from practicing.⁵ Phillips and the abolitionists nevertheless believed in the fundamental decency of humanity and its capacity to be persuaded by reason. Not all in the radical tradition would subscribe to such a salutary view of the masses.

Yet what the authors want us to understand about Phillips, their representative radical, was his unwavering commitment to the democratic potential of the majority despite his own persecution and torment. What undergirded that conviction? “Only a powerful sense of futurity: a confidence that today’s

2. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 7.

3. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 7.

4. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 8.

5. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 9.

persecuted minority would in the long run forge popular sentiment.”⁶ For the authors, Phillips’ greatest virtue was his capacity to understand revolutionary possibilities and adjust his tactics accordingly. Yet this tactical flexibility to the “fever-spasm” of revolution, as Phillips described it, was inextricably connected to his belief that an alternative future was possible and that a disciplined minority could hasten it by shaping public opinion in decisive moments.⁷

In effect, Brick and Phelps have not only described the defining features of an American radical tradition at its best but have given us a yardstick by which to measure those who claimed its mantle. Many would fall short. Even so, the authors outline a portrait of the American left as the heirs to a radical democratic heritage forged in the revolutionary fires of the 18th century. In the years after the Civil War, the “labor question” dominated the American left. The struggle to counter “wage slavery” produced a left that was more internationalist, skeptical of capitalism, and critical of the individualistic ethos that justified the glaring inequalities of wealth. It was in these years that the left took the form of a working-class movement that coexisted uneasily with social liberalism. At the outset, then, Brick and Phelps make the case that American radicalism paralleled the development of liberalism but remained ideologically distinct from it.

The evidence presented does not always support this distinction. Even so, Brick and Phelps set *Radicals in America* apart from analogous works such as Michael Kazin’s *American Dreamers*, which argues that “the radicals who made the most difference were not that radical at all,” since what they championed was “the fulfillment of two ideals their fellow Americans already cherished: individual freedom and communal responsibility.”⁸ It does so by postulating a conceptual distinction between radicals and liberals, the latter of whom tended to consider “social problems as aberrations to be fixed in an otherwise chiefly healthy society.”⁹ Where historian Doug Rossinow has detected a lineage of American reformers who “embraced a transformative concept of social progress,” which provided the conditions for a *sine qua non* between liberal and radicals while creating the possibility for an anti-capitalist, anti-racist alliance,¹⁰ Brick and Phelps emphasize the vital impact of the militant

6. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 9.

7. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 10.

8. Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), xvi, 275–277, quotation at xvi.

9. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 13.

10. Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 4, 8, quotation at 4. Other recent treatments of the left include Rhodri Jeffrey-Jones, *The American Left: Its Impact on Politics and Society since 1900* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), which emphasizes the socialist contribution to progressive reform through the modern period, Simon Hall’s *American Patriotism, American Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), which contests the “rise and

minority on the left imagination. In other words, radicals were not just liberals in a hurry, but proponents of a fundamentally different kind of society. While they might have “appeared to have reformist aims,”¹¹ such as in the struggle to dismantle Jim Crow, they built movements in which those possessed of a socialist vision expanded the liberals’ conception of what a democratic society might look like.

In fact, the authors argue, the movement for seemingly incremental reform has provided the crucible for progressive aspirations, radicalizing movement participants and exploring the horizons of what freedom and equality meant in American society. Rather than simply fostering “visions” that “were the extensions of a larger, far more consensual dream,” as Kazin put it,¹² Brick’s and Phelps’s radicals insisted that the society which liberals thought susceptible to modification in fact required “supplanting.” Point taken. But doesn’t this return us to Wendell Phillips, the archetype of *Radicals in America*, whose confidence in the latent democratic sensibilities of the majority would not be swayed by virulent opposition? Was Phillips not simply arguing for an expansion of the “far more consensual dream,” as Kazin would have it, rather than a fundamentally *different* society? As the authors are quick to explain, the “charge that radicals are not true Americans is a bid to sear them with marginality.”¹³ More than this, the authors concede, the “connection between conscious radical groups, usually very small, and vibrant and large social movements is the lifeblood of radical political development.”¹⁴ Considering that little radical *change* has occurred since the overthrow of slavery, however, one might be inclined to qualify the author’s assertion by stating that vibrant social movements have certainly shaped radical political *thought*, but left most of the political and economic structures of private accumulation in place.

This in no way detracts from the significance of what Brick and Phelps have achieved, which can only be grasped by examining the canvas on which they have painted their sweeping history of the American left (and its radicals). In chapters that cover World War II to the Occupy Movement, the authors present the image of a dynamic series of insurgencies in which women, African Americans, and racial minorities shaped and reconstituted the very meaning of democracy. Turning from the “usual suspects” to a kaleidoscope of

fall of the 1960s” thesis and explores the long echo of social movements that developed after the Nixon years, and Steve Fraser’s *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), which chronicles the democratic and egalitarian social movements that challenged the power of capital in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era but which, he argues, have no contemporary equivalent.

11. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 13.

12. Kazin, *American Dreamers*, xviii.

13. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 14.

14. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 13.

historical actors, they make the case that radical consciousness was not confined to the rituals of the picket line, but something that percolated up from the pages of the socialist *Studies on the Left*, the sit-ins and Freedom Schools of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and the feminist consciousness-raising sessions of the 1960s.

In the chapter titled "War and Peace: 1939–1948," for example, the authors turn to Emil Mazey, auto worker, United Automobile Workers activist, and war veteran, as an emblematic illustration of a radical left. Transcending trade-union consciousness, Mazey and his contemporaries organized around the interlocking convictions that "capitalism is unfair and unreliable, that an active labor movement is the fulcrum of change, and that social transformation requires a political party with a socialist program."¹⁵ Highlighting Mazey, the anti-Stalinist socialist, the authors shift the focus of the turbulent 1930s and 1940s away from the Communist Party. Instead, they concentrate on non-Stalinist socialists like Mazey and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph who "held that the optimal road to transformation lay in the autonomous working-class militancy and internationalism forged 'from below,' not a left-liberal version of American nationalism [i.e. the popular front] that gave political support to the Soviet state."¹⁶ In this chapter and in "All Over this Land, 1949–1959," Brick and Phelps explore the continuing vitality of the popular front in its cultural and political forms while documenting the devastating consequences of organized anti-communism on the American left.

There's little "romance of American Communism" (as Vivian Gornick once put it) in this recounting of the US Communist Party (CPUSA). The authors acknowledge the party's contribution to interracial activism and the organizing of "fairly successful" Unemployed Councils, but assert that the "hyperradical Third Period strategy" between 1928 and 1934 "proved ineffective and divisive."¹⁷ This claim runs afoul of the findings of historians such as Randi Storch, whose research into the party during *this* very period establishes that "Chicago's party experienced its first substantial growth in membership, when tens of thousands turned out for Communist rallies and the city's Communists developed lasting structures in the neighborhoods and factories." More than this, it was during the early years of the Great Depression that the party "learned how to work with liberals and non-Communists" while developing "successful organizing tactics" that appealed to a broad cross-section of the working class that shifted from sectarianism even before the orders came down from Moscow.¹⁸ Additionally, it was at this time, as historian

15. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 19.

16. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 23.

17. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 21.

18. Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grass-Roots, 1928–1935* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 2; this is a point corroborated by Dorothy Ray Healey in Healey and Maurice Isserman's *California Red: A Life in the Communist Party* (Urbana:

Fraser Ottanelli demonstrates, that the party made the Harlan miners' strike into a "national cause celebre." It also supported an agricultural strike among a multiethnic, migratory working-class that endured a level of violence from local authorities and business interests that made California exhibit "A" in what historian Kevin Starr has described as the closest thing to fascism that the United States has ever seen.¹⁹ That's not to mention the party's efforts to organize workers ranging from the auto and canning industries to the textile mills and cotton fields of the South.

If the CPUSA was "ineffective," it was largely because of the forces aligned against it, most notable of which was company-sponsored anti-union violence.²⁰ More than this, historian Victor Devinatz has convincingly challenged the conventional wisdom which holds that the party's Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) remained hopelessly marginal to the labour revolt of the 1930s. Not only did the TUUL achieve at least "modest" success in organizing manufacturing workers in New York, but it also championed democratic, rank-and-file unionism over top-down control by union leaders. At the same time, it created a cadre of trained organizers who would contribute decisively to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) insurgency after 1935. This success depended in turn on the wider political environment, which the passage of the National Industrial Relations Act in 1933 sharply improved.²¹

The purpose of dwelling on this point is to underline the evidence that this was perhaps *the* party of the American left that best understood the importance of effective organizing. According to the authors, it is the historical amnesia about organizing that constitutes one of the most conspicuous weaknesses of the contemporary American left. Examining the radical left after 1990, they conclude that the "attenuation of long-term *organizing*, which could establish an enduring infrastructure like that which the union movement provided for some decades after the Great Depression, left a vacuum of institutional forms that could focus public disquiet about the Iraq War and connect it to analysis, program, and action."²² Brick and Phelps are right to credit the union movement for this institutional framework, but severing from the history of arguably the most important factor in the advancement of industrial unionism in the 1930s (cue here John Lewis's line about the Communists being the dog to the CIO's hunter) elides important scholarship on the CPUSA. More than this, it overlooks an organization that exemplified the authors' prototypical

University of Illinois Press, 57–58.

19. Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 269.

20. Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 29–30.

21. Victor Devinatz, "A Reevaluation of the Trade Union Unity League, 1929–1934," *Science and Society* 71 (January 2007): 33–36.

22. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 300.

radicals: individuals or groups that pushed liberals "toward greater militancy ... and toward new views of the depth and breadth of social change needed to achieve freedom, equality, and solidarity."²³ If Communist activists achieved anything during the Great Depression, it was to force the issue of unemployed insurance and relief to the centre of national debate. In the process, they encouraged working-class confidence in the potential of direct action.

What complicates the issue further is the evidence that here was a radical party advocating for a decidedly non-revolutionary objective and at a time when the party was allegedly engaged in "hyperradical" ventilating. In this case, at least, the authors mistake rhetoric for action. The communists were not alone in organizing the unemployed, but they figured prominently in this early example of Great Depression protest. They continued to engage in labour defense throughout the decade, mobilizing at the grass-roots level to support those threatened by eviction and destitution.²⁴ This matters because of Brick's and Phelps's intervention in what the revival of an American left might look like and require. Few would dispute the party's notorious denial of the Stalinist purges and show trials, its suppression of internal dissent, and its lemming-like support of Soviet foreign policy. Yet obscuring the contributions that the party *did* make denies the authors an historical example of interracial, grass-roots, labour-oriented and, dare we say, disciplined organizing around concrete changes that still pointed toward a socialist future.

If one of the few weaknesses of *Radicals in America* is its portrait of the CPUSA, it is simultaneously one of its strengths, since it convincingly makes the case that the socialist imagination was never the monopoly of the Communists. In chapters on the left before the 1960s, the authors examine the radical pacifism and racial egalitarianism of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the anti-Stalinist factions that sought divergent paths toward a "workers' democracy" neither fascist nor communist, and the Trotskyist-influenced Black nationalism of C.L.R. James. Even while Cold War anti-communism accelerated the bureaucratization of the labour movement and solidified its fealty to the Democratic Party, civil rights activism broke out on several fronts, propelled in part by veterans of the labour movement and by the example of

23. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 13.

24. As Annelise Orleck explained, housewife activism constituted another field in which communists and non-communists cooperated before the Soviet Union's official adoption of the popular front policy. "Shortly after Roosevelt was elected president," Orleck argues, "hostilities between Communist and non-Communist women in the labor movement were temporarily set aside. AFL-affiliated women's auxiliaries and CP-affiliated women's neighborhood councils worked together to organize consumer protests and lobby for regulation of food and housing costs. This happened in 1933, well before the CP initiated its Popular Front policy urging members to join with "progressive" non-Communist groups and well before the Congress of Industrial Organizations extended its hand to Communists to rejoin the labor movement." See "We Are That Mythical Thing Called the Public: Militant Housewives During the Great Depression," *Feminist Studies* 19 (Spring 1993): 157.

African anti-colonial movements in the 1940s and 1950s. Black nationalists and pan-Africanists such as former Communist Audley Moore sustained a movement toward Black liberation that has too often been ignored in accounts of civil rights activism in the 1950s.²⁵

As Brick and Phelps elucidate, it was at this unlikely moment that a “circuit of radicals, anticolonialists, and socialists” coalesced. They joined veterans of earlier voter registration campaigns in organizing a community-based civil rights movement that would achieve its most dramatic breakthrough in the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott.²⁶ In these and subsequent chapters, Brick and Phelps establish the critical place of Black nationalism in the history of the left, not simply the civil rights movement. Equally important, the authors incorporate gay, lesbian, and transgendered activism into the history of dissent. In a climate of open hostility toward homosexuality, they point to organizations like the Mattachine Society that fought the repression of the wider society but also to the intolerance of the Communist Party and its gendered images of the proletarian hero. Synthesizing some of the most important research of the last twenty years, the authors present the image of a surprisingly vibrant left in the alleged age of conformity. This incarnation of the left fostered a “left-bohemian milieu”²⁷ that critiqued industrialization, questioned Cold War verities, demanded racial equality, privileged grass-roots activism over hierarchical authority, and paved the way for a new left.

The authors’ treatment of 1960s activism covers familiar territory, but what elevates it is their determination to foreground the evolving movements for racial and gender emancipation. It was the civil rights movement, not the predominantly white student movement, that “propelled the mass radicalization of the 1960s.”²⁸ If the argument is familiar to historians, it is less so to the wider public and to students: the civil rights movement was the engine of 1960s social protest and the primary example of the “moral idealism” that would define its sensibilities.²⁹ These chapters on left activism from 1960 to 1973 cover it all: from the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Students for a Democratic Society, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, and the *Port Huron Statement* to the ascent of Malcolm X, anti-colonial internationalism, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the Black Panthers, the latter of which is treated with remarkable balance and insight. If the Panthers were complicit in their own demise, they most poignantly captured

25. This oversight is quickly being corrected by histories that connect the Black emancipation movement in the United States to movements for liberation throughout the African diaspora. See, for example, Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

26. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 79.

27. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 82.

28. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 93.

29. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 96.

the smouldering discontent of those for whom the message of Gandhian non-violence rang hollow. They also fashioned a program of socialist action that delivered material benefits to African Americans untouched by the beneficent hand of Great Society liberalism.

If the authors seem to devote an inordinate amount of attention to the sectarian delusions of Marxist factions like Progressive Labor and the perennially-puzzling Weatherman, with its juvenile "Days of Rage" and senseless violence, it is in the service of illuminating what is so often lost in narratives of New Left decline: the pervasive sense that fundamental change was imminent. "To see 1965–1973 as an exceptional historical moment of radicalization, with countless creative bursts of dissent, is not to say there existed a 'revolutionary situation' but rather a situation in which a revolutionary imagination flourished."³⁰ How else to explain the rise of women's liberation, which the authors accurately describe as the movement that had "the deepest, most lasting effect on American life."³¹

Equally important, Brick and Phelps demonstrate that this revolutionary impulse continued into the 1970s. Having examined the multiple spokes of activism – gay liberation, Latino and Asian identity consciousness, the American Indian Movement, and the antiwar crusade – that sprang from the hub of the civil rights movement, the authors persuasively conclude that the decade witnessed a "crescendo" that "widened and diversified the radical agenda, resulting in much richer radical visions of freedom, equality, and community." More than this, they contend that "No single thread of theoretical or ideological argument, no single concise platform, could represent all the dimensions of that radical movement," which eschewed the frequently crude economism, contrived cultural pluralism, and heteronormativity of the Old Left for greater ideological and racial diversity.³² Even so, in an analysis that stresses the tension between the margins and the mainstream, it is surprising to see so little attention devoted to the urban rebellions of 1967. Perhaps more than a single demonstration or march, these uprisings strengthened Black nationalism, produced an official response in the form of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report, and intensified the conservative conviction that Great Society liberalism was conspicuously responsible for the social pathologies of the period. In addition, those who mounted the barricades in 1968 did so, as historian Nelson Lichtenstein has argued, out of the conviction that capitalism was "far too stable," a "claustrophobic economic system that seemed like a huge bureaucratic machine," an assumption that prevented them from grasping the structural transformation of industrial capitalism then taking place.³³

30. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 169.

31. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 164.

32. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 171.

33. Nelson Lichtenstein, *A Contest of Ideas: Capital, Politics, and Labor* (Urbana: University of

It was not one that escaped the attention of Martin Luther King Jr. By 1965, King was routinely appealing for an alliance between Black and white workers to confront what he thought was one of the most daunting challenging facing American workers: automation in the manufacturing sector.³⁴

Brick and Phelps make their singularly greatest contribution by pulling together the strands of left activism in the period from 1973 to the present. Most importantly, they establish the vitality of left movements in the 1970s, a decade that has frequently been portrayed as either barren of political consciousness or dominated entirely by the Rise of the Right.³⁵ The authors restore to the historical narrative the labour revival of the early 1970s, which saw an astonishing upswing in wildcat strikes as well as a direct challenge to the unrepresentative and corrupt leadership of several mainline unions. Clearly a democratic impulse continued throughout this decade of “anticipation.”³⁶ This was evident not only in the development of the environmental movement and the revival of democratic socialism, but perhaps most importantly in the advancement of the women’s movement, which was marked by the crystallization of Black feminist consciousness and the critique of gender norms at the foundation of women’s liberation. Despite its racial and class fractures, second-wave feminism aspired to more than the inclusion of women in the capitalist system of production. Instead, as Nancy Fraser argues, it “sought to transform the system’s deep structures and animating values – in part by decentring wage work and valorizing unwaged activities, especially the socially necessary carework performed by women.”³⁷

This was a period of struggle, not simply right-wing triumph, as conservative retaliation against the drive for women’s equality expanded and radicalized the women’s movement. Despite acrimonious divisions over race, class, and sexual orientation, feminists began “coalescing broadly around a general set of aims, particularly as liberal feminists moved leftward, feeling the pressure of their critics among lesbians, women of colour, labor union women, and

Illinois Press, 2013), 196.

34. Martin Luther King Jr., address to the Illinois State AFL-CIO, 7 October 1965, in Michael Honey, ed., *All Labor has Dignity*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 115.

35. For example, Bruce Schulman’s study of the period emphasizes the alienation and disaffection of American activists in the early 1970s. The principal legacy of the 1960s, Schulman argues, was the counterculture and a fragmented women’s movement. See *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001); the last fifteen years has seen a proliferation of studies on the conservative movement, one of the most important though neglected is Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

36. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, Chapter 5.

37. Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (March–April 2009): 105.

those with a sixties background.”³⁸ The anti-statist, conservative triumph of the 1980s was anything but a given. Pervasive anti-corporate opinion flourished alongside more expressly anti-government appeals. “Even at the end of the decade,” the authors argue, “the left was still animated by a great sense of practical possibilities rooted in on-the-ground mobilization.”³⁹ If many of Brick’s and Phelps’s examples of left defiance in the late 1970s appear more defensive than radical, this only serves to underline the magnitude of the capitalist campaign to restore profitability and the hostility of those who considered women’s equality a threat to the status quo. While Kazin is right to argue that “sixties radicals in the U.S. were unable to gain to political clout that may have reinforced their cultural influence and prevented the rise of the political right,” Brick and Phelps understand that this is not the way it appeared to the defenders of the corporate-military establishment at the time.⁴⁰ In their report on the political landscape in 1975, the Trilateral Commission, a combination of corporate and financial elites from the United States, Europe, and Japan sponsored by banker David Rockefeller, concluded that the most threatening product of the tempestuous 1960s was “an excess of democracy,” an unsettling, subversive “democratic distemper” that threatened to shift state priorities from military to social spending.⁴¹ According to American commission member Samuel Huntington, the essential threat lay in “the reassertion of the primacy of equality as a goal in social, economic, and political life.”⁴² However fragmented the left became in the early 1970s, it challenged the prerogatives and presumptions of capital, not least of all on the shopfloor.

Commendably, Brick and Phelps devote considerable attention to radical dissent after 1980. If the left efforts appeared chronically diffuse, dissidents continued to mobilize along several key fronts. Challenging the image of a quiescent America content to submit to Reaganite conservatism, the authors detail the opposition to the administration’s support for murderous authoritarian regimes in Latin America, the campaign against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the escalation of eco-radicalism, and the direct-action tactics of ACT UP against a government indifferent to the AIDS epidemic then ravaging the gay community. The protracted packinghouse strike at Hormel in Austin, Minnesota and the successful mining strike in Pittston, Virginia provided evidence that organized labour had not capitulated either. Even so, the prospects for an organized *political* challenge to the ideology of market

38. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 208.

39. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 215.

40. Kazin, *American Dreamers*, 250.

41. Michael J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 113, 106.

42. Quoted in Edward P. Morgan, *What Really Happened to the 1960s: How Mass Media Culture Failed American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 243–244.

dominance steadily declined. Following the demise of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, which sought to build a multiracial, working-class alliance that might recapture the Democratic Party from the forces of centrism, the best that left dissidents could do was win isolated victories. "Across the 1980s, radicalisms had cropped up, exerted a check on abuses, and won clusters of recruits who helped a left to survive," but it never crystallized to the point that it could "rattle the nerves of the elites that hold power in property, government, and culture."⁴³

The seemingly inexorable rise of an ideology of market primacy in the 1990s eroded social programs, labour protections, the wages of manufacturing workers, and the economic security of average Americans. As the authors point out, however, this age of capitalist restructuring did more than make contingency and "downsizing" the norm for wage-working Americans. It also "produced a corrosive cynicism that undermined belief in the viability of common action leading to an alternative future."⁴⁴ The global economic justice movement represented the most salient challenge to the presumptions of turbo-capitalism. Mobilizing some 50,000 protestors, several hundred of whom engaged in direct action tactics, an alliance of global justice, labour, and environmental groups derailed the World Trade Organization's ministerial meeting in November 1999. The protest countered the free-market triumphalism of the era and offered a powerful reminder of the possibilities for militant protest and coalition politics. The criminalization of dissent following 11 September 2001 undermined this burgeoning movement.

But so too did its underlying ethos, which emphasized horizontal coalition-building and maximum flexibility. A legacy of the New Left, which rejected the centralized unilateralism of the Old Left, "participatory democracy" defined the New Left, but it repudiated this ideal as it descended into sectarianism and ideological inflexibility in the late 1960s. The 1990s incarnation of the left emphatically underlined the need for horizontal, or "network" conceptions of radical organizing. Yet its devotion to "pluralism, flexibility, and lack of coercion," its insistence that left opposition should be defined by a "loose and shifting confederation of causes and groups"⁴⁵ seemed ill-suited to the task of challenging the power of consolidated capital and an increasingly militarized state. Despite injecting the language of economic inequality into international discourse once again, the Occupy Movement of 2011 demonstrated the same weaknesses. For all the vitality and inclusiveness of a protest that captured the imagination of the young and disaffected, the Occupy phenomenon "caused barely a ripple in the functioning of capital, nor did it advance political demands about foreclosure policy, bailouts for the rich, a Robin Hood tax

43. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 259.

44. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 267.

45. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 318.

on financial speculation, or any other measure that might check Wall Street's power."⁴⁶

The authors' epilogue on the future of the left provides an extraordinarily balanced assessment of what the left has meant in the 20th century, what it has failed to achieve, and what it might take to revive it. Central to this exquisite discussion is their distinction between the impulse to achieve greater cultural liberation and the drive to promote economic equality. The authors convincingly argue that, historically, the two have been closely linked. In the years since the business-led counterrevolution against the New Deal, however, the two have become decoupled, in part because of capitalism's capacity to absorb the idiom and imagery of cultural liberation into the logic of market dominance.

If the social movements of the 1970s did in fact represent a democratic threat to the status quo, the reaction of the corporate-state alliance all but contained it. This has further undermined the material foundation necessary to assert personal freedom. As the authors argue, the commodification of everything, which still represents the dominant imperative of the era, underlines the stark contrast between "*liberalizing* social relations, in the sense of widening the bounds of acceptable behavior and extending access to achievement for individuals of diverse groups, and *democratizing* and *equalizing* social relations." As Brick and Phelps deftly illustrate, "what does it mean that anyone of any color can sit in the front of the bus, for example, or that it contains a wheelchair lift, if buses, heavily used by the working poor and elderly, now come with much less frequency and at greater cost to riders because of privatizations and cuts to public transit."⁴⁷

This connection between achieving economic democracy and cultural liberation, between social equality and individual freedom, is one that has become increasingly obscured, the authors contend, by a left that fetishes "localism" and disparages any effort to fashion a common set of ideals that might bind a diverse constituency together. Rather than disparage identity politics and the "rights revolution," however, the authors take left remnants to task largely for their tactical failures, their centrifugal tendencies toward splendid and ineffective isolation. For Brick and Phelps, the antidote is to rediscover the link between "personal liberation" and "the struggle for social equality, common welfare, mutual aid, and collective action."⁴⁸ It requires a new animating vision of a world transformed by democratic socialism, a vision powerful enough to overcome the cynicism and despondency of our own era. Above all, it requires

46. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 308.

47. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 318.

48. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 316.

what the Communist Party, despite its many transgressions, understood as the essential precondition for political change: “a respect for organization.”⁴⁹

Brick and Phelps have written an indispensable synthesis of the history of the American left that is neither sentimental nor celebratory. Its most important achievement is the recovery of the voices of those often footnoted or simply ignored in the narratives of the mainstream labour and civil rights movements. The American left has indeed been more diverse, more complex, more voluble, and more persistent than is often portrayed, particularly in the post-1960s period. If many of those featured in *Radicals in America* appear less radical than the authors have contended, and if the marginal – despite their dreaming of the mainstream – usually remained on the margins, voices of opposition endured into the 1980s and beyond. That may be cold comfort to those seeking a usable past in the history of the left, but it confirms an important point which is routinely forgotten or deliberately ignored by mainstream pundits and bears repeating: no period in the American past has produced an ideological consensus so monolithic that it stifled dissent altogether.

Yet the authors pose the following question: why has the post-1990 left had such a negligible impact on the exercise of the capitalist power structure in American society? In answer to their own question, one would have liked to have seen a more thorough investigation of the problem of developing a party of opposition. As historian Paul Heideman has shown in his discussion of the pre-World War I Socialist Party of America, the dynamic between a party committed to social transformation and a grass-roots movement engaged in democratic movement-building is critical. *Contra* early 20th century sociologist Werner Sombart’s assertion that material abundance nullified the socialist alternative in the US, those in positions of power “recognized that socialism did have a mass base,” which drew from a “wellspring of ferocious discontent with American reality.” It was this synergistic relationship between base and party which US authorities did everything possible to neutralize during the First World War.⁵⁰

Beyond questions of parties, tactics, and paths to power, even beyond the question of the extraordinary financial and political power arrayed against the most modest of the left’s demands, lies a larger question. It is one which the authors raise, but which should be underlined as a central take-away of this book. In short, what chance does opposition have when it lacks a vision of the future transformed by the principles of the present? Contrasting the “great refusal” of the late 19th and early 20th century with the contemporary “age of acquiescence,” historian Steve Fraser observes that the former “always originated in a realm before money and looked for gratification in a world beyond money.” Despite the evidence of material self interest, what distinguished

49. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 318.

50. Paul Heideman, “The Party We Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Party of America,” *Jacobin*, 23 (Fall 2016): 65.

these social insurgencies “were ineffable yearnings to redefine what it meant to be human altogether.”⁵¹ It was these “ineffable yearnings” that animated Wendell Phillips, the very example of left commitment for Brick and Phelps.

No less so did these yearnings motivate the communists and socialists of the 1930s. As Vivian Gornick describes it, gatherings between her own parents and their CPUSA allies became occasions that re-affirmed a powerful sense of their place in a larger historical moment. As she writes,

It is perhaps hard to understand now, but at that time, in this place, the Marxist vision of world solidarity as translated by the Communist Party induced in the most ordinary of men and women a sense of one’s own humanity that ran deep, made life feel large; large and clarified. It was to this clarity of inner being that so many became not only attached, but addicted. No reward of life, no love nor fame nor wealth, could compete with the experience.⁵²

The addiction would prove fatal, since the belief that they were enlisted in a teleological march that culminated in Moscow permitted delusions about the character of the Soviet Union. Even so, the lived experience of solidarity, of feeling a deeper, larger, and more meaningful humanity, fueled action. No less important, the conception of history as the chronicle of class struggle imparted meaning to the world around them. Like those who extolled the producers’ republic, the co-operative commonwealth, and industrial democracy, the socialists of the 1930s espoused a futurist vision informed by a theory of historical change. The theory was convincing because it seemed to explain why poverty and insecurity persisted in a society capable of generating abundance.

It is difficult to conceive of any futurist vision taking hold of the American left today. In many precincts of the left, such a vision might seem harmlessly quaint, or worse, a return to the totalizing meta-narratives of an Enlightenment tradition now considered obsolete if not dangerous. In an age that has so fully absorbed the hyper-individualism prescribed by neoliberalism, exchanged the virtue of social equality for the frisson of personal choice, become accustomed to the notion that market efficiency is the ultimate arbiter of the common good, and dispensed with history as little more than a repository for postmodernist pastiche, one has reason to wonder whether even “assertive political engagement” will be enough.⁵³

51. Steve Fraser, *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015), 420–421.

52. Vivian Gornick, “When Communism Inspired Americans,” 29 April 2017, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/29/opinion/sunday/when-communism-inspired-americans.html?_r=0.

53. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 320. For an intriguing and provocative analysis of these late twentieth century intellectual developments, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). In Rodgers’ estimation, “the dominant tendency of the age was toward disaggregation,” (5), which decisively undermined the structural, institutional, and contextual basis for democratic social thought.



WARNING:
WHEN YOU DIVE INTO YOUR FAVOURITE
MAGAZINE YOU MIGHT GET LOST.

There are hundreds of Canadian magazines in stores now.
Don't say we didn't warn you.

See two worlds collide:
📍 CanadasMagazineStore.ca/video



**Magazines
Canada**