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Labour and the Left in America
A Review Essay

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Milton Cantor, *The Divided Left: American Radicalism, 1900-1975* (New York: Hill and Wang 1978).

Glen Seretan, *Daniel De Leon: The Odyssey of an American Marxist* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1979).

Bernard J. Brommel, *Eugene V. Debs, Spokesman for Labor and Socialism* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr 1978).

Norma Fain Pratt, *Morris Hillquit: A Political History of an American Jewish Socialist* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press 1979).

Carl and Ann Barton Reeve, *James Connolly and the United States* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press 1978).

Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist. The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978).

STUDIES ON THE HISTORY of the American left rarely escape the question of why socialism failed to become a permanent alternative for a radical transformation of American society. Although many attempts have been made to provide a conclusive answer, that question is by no means settled and, if properly approached, it is likely to remain on the agenda for quite some time.

Similarly, the period during which American socialism experienced its greatest success will probably continue to be a centre of focus for students concerned with that important question. From the latter part of the nineteenth century to the 1920s, in fact, a whole generation of American socialists lived and fought with the belief that a radical social transformation was as much on the agenda in the U.S. as it was in any of the industrialized countries of Europe. Socialist presence was felt at all levels of society: the labour movement was experiencing a rapid growth and consolidation and the intensity of industrial strife made American workers one of the most militant working classes.

Yet that generation of socialists, with its strengths and its weaknesses, with its hopes and its illusions, is only part of the picture. Equally if not more important is the American working class itself — that historical actor which more than any other would have insured the success of a socialist alternative. Failure to give it the historical centrality it deserves has often meant that the question "why socialism failed" connotes a negative judgment on the American working class for not having embraced the socialist message.

Few historians of American socialism have resisted the temptation of

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resorting to that classical theoretical construct which divides the working class into two groups: those who possessed class consciousness and those — the great majority of American workers — who did not develop it.

Thus, the charge against the Commons' School for having concerned itself primarily with skilled trade unionists and neglected the great mass of American workers, often may also be applied to many leftist historians for their tendency to belittle the study of workers who allowed *themselves to be "integrated" into the system*. The result has been that in answering the question of the socialist failure in America, the emphasis has been put either on the socialist movement itself (its leaders, its organizations, its theoretical tools), or else on "the system" that managed to remain impervious to the socialist challenge.

Cantor's book provides a recent example of this ambivalent way of approaching the question. As a synthesis of the best known literature on American radicalism, his book is very useful. He discusses the major organizations of the left in the twentieth century — from the Socialist Labor Party to the New Left of the 1960s and early 1970s — and provides competent evaluations of each of those organizations' distinct contribution to the success or failure of the movement. However, Cantor's application to the American scene of the classical working-class consciousness construct does not lead us any further in our understanding of the left's failure in the U.S. In his answer to that question one finds very little that helps us understand why the American working class remained cold to or outrightly rejected the socialist vision — except to learn that American workers developed a false consciousness that made them complacent to what capitalism offered. Cantor's interpretative approach is somewhat enriched by his utilization of the Gramscian notion of hegemony. The cultural and social values produced by American capitalism had the historical quality of being hegemonic and of being imposed on the working class through an unprecedented apparatus of psychological and ideological manipulation. The workers' internalization of those values insured widespread allegiance to the system, thus rendering class domination less risky and more efficient.

One might agree that the notion of hegemony can be more fruitfully applied to the American scene than the worn-out Leninist notion of stages of working-class consciousness. One should not forget, however, that in Gramsci's use this notion was predicated on a careful assessment of the class relations existing in a society at a given stage of capitalist development. While capitalist hegemony is always directed against the working class, its mode of deployment may vary depending (among other things) on the degree of power the working class has and, consequently, on the concrete threat it poses to capitalist domination. Cantor concedes that these complex historical questions cannot be properly dealt with without a thorough study of the working class itself; and in fact it is from such an avenue of research that progress will be made (and indeed is being made) towards a new understanding of capitalist hegemonic rule and of the socialist experience.

But to argue for a more thorough knowledge of the American working class in all its expressions and specificity does not mean that already we know all there is to know about the socialist movement. As a movement acting to transform American society, it had a historical subjectivity made of theoretical elaborations, organizational strategies, and — last but not least — personalities. This is what makes biographies of socialist militants an important genre of historical literature. They may exert a corrective influence against the tendency of mystifying the movement, as they allow us to penetrate deeper into the realm of daily existence where socialist militants like anyone else had to contend with all

those elements of which ordinary human life is made.

Of course, biography is no less subject to interpretative problems or methodological choices. Witness, for instance, the growing popularity of psychohistory which no doubt represents the latest methodological innovation in the study of biographies. One historian of American socialism who has made ample use of the psychohistory approach is Glen Seretan. His book on Daniel De Leon is replete with terms such as "self-definition," "unconscious," "cathartic experience," "subliminal," and so on — terms which are part of an interpretative framework Seretan has constructed to make sense out of De Leon's contradictory experience as a major shaper of American socialism. That De Leon was one of the most complex personages of that generation of radicals is something readily acknowledged by most students of socialism; it is also reflected in the difficulty one has to reconcile his brilliance as a Marxist theorist with his dogmatism as the absolute master of the Socialist Labor Party from 1890 until his death in 1914. However, historians who have limited their analysis of De Leon to his theoretical contributions and to his controversial political practice have come up with a very distorted picture.

According to Seretan, the key that makes De Leon's peculiar experience intelligible is to be found in his intellectual formative stage — a period marked by a profound crisis of identity and by a persistent sense of personal alienation as De Leon wandered from one reform movement to another. What brought De Leon's anguished psychological and political search to an end was the combined influence of French novelist Eugène Sue's writings and of Marxism. Sue's novel *Le Juif errant* enabled De Leon to appropriate the notion of proletarian community, allowing him to transmute his identity crisis into a powerful personal sense of historical mission. Henceforth, De Leon, "the wandering Jew," would become De Leon, "the builder of a proletarian community," and a leader in the latter's march toward liberation. As to Marxism, Seretan maintains that it provided De Leon with the ideological frame within which he could more clearly work out his identity transformation, while permitting him to translate his sense of mission into a scientific programmatic line. Seretan is very skillful in showing how De Leon read into Marxism many of the fundamental life questions which had tormented him in his search for a new identity. The class struggle thesis is a good example. De Leon found it especially appealing, because, in Seretan's words,

> ... its cataclysmic depiction of social change satisfied a deeply felt need for a dramatic and thoroughgoing resolution of his vexing problem of personal alienation. It promised a cathartic experience, a society-wide purgation of the conditions that isolated men from one another. It acted, therefore, to salve his impatience for relief, an impatience that had earlier contributed to his disillusionment with the temporizing attitudes and inconclusive results of reform movements.(67)

If this analysis of De Leon's motivations for embracing Marxism and devoting his life to the socialist movement is correct, it would explain the extent to which his political and theoretical approach grew out of an essentially ethical understanding of the tasks and responsibilities of a socialist militant. The dogmatism and sectarianism which marked his practice were not those of a power-thirsty politician seeking self-aggrandizement and material rewards, but rather those of the high-priest seeking to instill in his fellow party members discipline, belief in doctrinal purity, and faith in the ultimate redemption of the proletariat.

Seretan's thorough research, coupled with his sophisticated understanding of socialist politics, has produced the best exposition of De Leon's theories and political practice to date. However, his use of the "Wandering Jew" literary theme as an interpretative tool may strike readers as being super-imposed and a problem-solving device. He concedes that its adop-

tion was dictated by "the limitations imposed by incomplete data," and one cannot but question the psychoanalytic operations he performs on De Leon's formative life-stage in the absence of such critical sources as private correspondence and memoirs. To be sure, Seretan does have important pieces of evidence which lend some credence to his thesis: Sue's influence on De Leon is amply demonstrated in the latter's writing; De Leon's fixation with concealing his Jewish origin, even at the cost of lying publicly, is also well documented. But a substantial part of Seretan's argument is based only on a skilled exegesis of De Leon's highly symbolic and rhetorical public pronouncements. Treating these as vehicles through which De Leon was unconsciously giving away bits and pieces of his life-data is stretching one's interpretative tools a bit too far, particularly for a propagandist like De Leon, for whom the art of oratory was one of the major weapons in his struggle for persuasion. Seretan's subtle probing into De Leon's mental processes and how they affected his political practices may be viewed as an important warning against easy generalizations about "socialist consciousness" — let alone working-class consciousness. At the same time, his reading of De Leon's *Weltanschauung* in terms of eschatology and religious symbolism will probably end up giving credence to those interpretations stressing the "other worldness" of American socialism.

Less complex, and better known, are Eugene Debs' motivations for embracing socialism. While spending six months in a remote jail for having led the American Railway Union in the famous Pullman strike, Debs was introduced by some of his visitors to socialist literature. These readings helped to clarify in his mind the meaning of the class struggle of which he himself had become a living embodiment.

While completing his jail term, Debs also kept himself busy setting up with the other six ARU prisoners "The Cooperative Colony of Liberty Jail" with jurisdiction over its seven members' daily physical exercises and study. Debs filled the position of the teacher. The other three officers were an inspector, a colonel, and a professor. Psychohistory could probably go a long way analysing this fragment of Debs' life, but Bernard Brommel — the author of the most recent biography of Eugene Debs — settles for less. Since Debs' life is the best known of all American socialist leaders' lives, with almost a dozen biographies already in existence, Brommel sees his contribution mainly as that of reconstructing Debs' private and public life in the light of new sources which he himself was instrumental in uncovering. At times the author's enthusiasm for bringing to light previously unknown details of Debs' life borders on gossip. For example, some readers may find it interesting to know that Debs' conjugal life was not entirely satisfactory and that consequently he kept for some time a rather intense relationship with a Mrs. Curry, a voluntary helper in Debs' office. But to go on and tell us that while he was in a federal prison for anti-war activities the prison warden allowed Mrs. Curry to visit Debs alone in his jail room may denote more than just love for details.

However, this question of infidelity is but one of several aspects of Debs' private and public life which Brommel brings to light in order to give us a more humane and less mythical image of a man known to many generations as the great apostle of American socialism. Debs' dedication to the socialist cause, his spirit of self-sacrifice (he spent many years accepting speaking engagements left and right so he could fulfil his promise to repay a $40,000 debt incurred by the ARU at the time of the Pullman strike), and the enthusiasm he drew from ordinary workers have long made him the object of veneration.

Socialist Party leaders knew this well and in five presidential elections they ran him as the party's vote-getter. In a political culture where the candidate's public image was one of the most formidable weapons to

capture people's votes, Debs became the image of an organization seeking to convince voters that socialism was the best choice for America. But Brommel shows convincingly that in accepting that role Debs knew where his strengths as socialist leader lay. He would spend considerable time on his speech notes so that his public addresses could be most effective. And when he addressed his audiences, his style was inspirational. As at the time of his prison Cooperative Colony, Debs saw his role as being a teacher to the American working class. American socialism had its professors, its colonels, and it certainly had its inspectors, but teaching to ordinary workers the simple truths of socialism was what the movement needed most. This does not mean that Debs kept himself entirely out of intra-party struggles. According to Brommel, Debs also did his share of skillful manoeuvring, a part of which consisted in using the prestige he had built up among the rank and file to make his positions prevail with the least involvement in convention-floor fights. Just as Brommel revives the image of Debs as the leader above party factions, so he brings some new insights to the question of how radical Debs' socialism was. His method is sound when he makes the distinction between Debs' fiery pronouncements and his political practice. Debs' credentials for being classed on the left wing of the socialist movement include, beside his leadership in one of the most notable early attempts of industrial unionism, his participation in the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World, and a genuine faith in the revolutionary potential of the American proletariat. But when the disagreement over the use of direct action turned into open hostility and IWW leader Bill Haywood was expelled from the party for advocating this form of struggle, Debs sided with the party's notables on the ground that the use of violence was detrimental to the interests of the working class. Brommel is right in detecting in Debs' position on this issue a mixture of moralism and opportunism, though he does not sufficiently develop the theoretical implications. For, direct action in its various forms was a working-class practice to which labourers resorted — regardless of their degree of consciousness — to make their resistance against managerial tyranny more effective. There is reason to believe that of all the organizational crises the socialist movement suffered in that period, the one over the issue of direct action was the most significant. It not only brought to a head the long and arduous debate on the relationship between political and economic action — debate to which all currents of the socialist movement had participated at one point or another; it also took place at a time when the capitalist restructuring of the labour process was most sweeping, transforming the terrain of class confrontation and calling for new forms of workers' struggle. Debs and his party associates' response on this issue revealed how theoretically helpless the party was in the face of their transformations. It confirmed that their dichotomy between political and economic action (and its strategic implications) was predicated on a limited understanding of the workplace and of its centrality in the capitalist project of class subjugation. To be true, in sanctioning direct action and sabotage the IWW was certainly not inventing that practice. Yet, their willingness to elevate it to a *mot d'ordre* denotes an extremely keen perception of the changing industrial climate and an effort to make organizational strategy rest on the daily reality of the work place. In condemning this practice and disassociating from it, the SPA was only retreating into the old theoretical merry-go-round, while of course revamishing its image for a new assault at the polls.

Probably no one in the SPA establishment was more concerned about the party's public image than Morris Hillquit. His influence in determining the policies and strategies of the organization — from its inception through the 1920s — was cru-

cial. And quite often this influence was used against radical left-wingers who, in his view, threatened the orderly progress of the political institution he had done so much to shape. If throughout that period the SPA had an ideological and policy inspector, it was Morris Hillquit who came closest to embodying that role. The historical portrait that Norma Fain Pratt has given us of this major socialist figure is an important contribution to the study of American socialist leadership. Readers may find little new in her conclusion that Hillquit's insistence with working within the system and his belief in "the potential inherent in the established system" made him the leading representative of reformist socialism in the progressive era. But one finds extremely revealing her argument that Hillquit's brand of reformism was based not just on an optimistic view of capitalist institutions but also on a skeptical attitude towards workers' potential for radical change. As she puts it, ". . . there was little in [Hillquit's] theory that could encourage a worker to believe that his/her action — even a strike or a vote — might make a basic difference." (248) One factor contributing to this negative view of the working class was, according to Pratt, the embourgeoisement process she detects in Hillquit's life experience as he climbed from the poverty of the Lower East Side Jewish immigrant settlement to the prominence of a rather successful law practice. Search for respectability and identification with the middle class became important ingredients of the reformist stance, concealing a view of the working class as a sort of transitory state that capable and intelligent workers would sooner or later leave behind. This may explain why, as Pratt argues, Hillquit did nothing for the creation of a permanent base of working-class support. It may also explain why he sought in the Americanization of the socialist party the answer for a lasting insertion of socialism into the progressive evolution of American life.

Equally enlightening is Pratt's discussion of Hillquit's attitude toward immigrant workers and toward ethnicity as a component of the working-class experience in America. In his attempt to divest himself of a Jewish identity Hillquit did not go so far as De Leon did. Nevertheless he saw ethnicity and the stress on ethnic identity as a divisive element — as something which retarded the attainment of a civic maturity within the socialist movement. Here again the answer lay in Americanization as it allowed immigrants to rid themselves of their ethnicity and become more rapidly assimilated into the mainstream of American life. Progressive reformers could not agree more with this vision of social change — especially at a time when massive immigration and the ongoing process of ethnic recomposition among the labouring classes made social and ideological control an extremely arduous task, one which finally could only be dealt with through the racist and repressive measures of the Quota Laws and of the American Plan.

In stark contrast with Hillquit's stance toward immigration and ethnicity were the views and the practice of a less known but equally important socialist figure of that period — James Connolly. He is the subject of a biographical study by Carl and Ann B. Reeve who unfortunately seem excessively concerned with canonizing their hero for the American audience and in so doing fail to unveil the full meaning of a very significant life experience.

Connolly's involvement in the American socialist movement was limited to the 1902-1910 period, when he sojourned in the U.S., attracted both by the growth of the movement and by the need to improve the material condition of his family. His presence in the American struggles was as immediate as his reinsertion in the Irish struggles when he moved back to his native country and a few years later became the ideological and military leader of the Easter Rebellion which cost him his life and made him the great martyr of the struggle for Irish independence. Connolly's intense

organizing activities with the SLP first, and with the IWW later, brought him into close contact with the daily reality of immigrant workers. He went as far as learning a foreign language so that his organizing work among New York dock workers could be more effective, and fought for the creation of an Irish-American Socialist Federation so as to better translate the socialist message in terms of the concrete conditions of Irish immigrants.

In many ways Connolly's life experience embodied a new working-class internationalism which has received less attention from historians than the official internationalism made of carefully worded resolutions, annual congresses, and national delegations. It was an internationalism produced by capital's global penetration and by the unprecedented shifts of working populations between and across continents. In this new geography of labour power — of which the U.S. became the leading terminal point as well as a major crossroad — immigration became more than ever before a crucial terrain through which workers' experiences circulated and interacted, often erupting in truly multinational strikes in the heart of the American colossus. The Reeves do not raise the question whether Connolly's former militant experience in Ireland contributed to making him one of the most able organizers and strategists in the U.S., or whether Connolly's experience in the U.S. may have determined the political choices he made as leader of the Irish resistance. Yet, in the reconstruction of this sort of intercontinental itineraries and networks and in the discovery of the life experience of less known or still unknown militants lies an important challenge for historians who view the history of radicalism as part of the history of the working class, rather than merely the history of ideas and of leaders.

A similar point can be made concerning the history of anarchism in America. Historians who, like David De Leon, have approached it as intellectual history have rarely shown how, as a component of American radicalism, anarchism became operative in working-class struggles. De Leon's elaborate typology of all major American anarchist currents ends up being a mere cataloguing of ideas, organizations, and leaders, and is far from supporting his major claim that anarchism has always been the only authentic form of radicalism in America.

One learns much more from the life story of a little known American anarchist, Voltairine de Cleyre, as it has been reconstructed by Paul Avrich. De Cleyre's contribution to the American anarchist movement has been overshadowed by the exploits of her contemporary movement celebrity, Emma Goldman. Yet, following the itinerary of this American-born radical through her agitational activities, her writings, and her work among the immigrants of the Philadelphia slums, one gains important insights into the social and cultural climate of urban America in the progressive period. One also learns a great deal about the particular difficulties and conflicts encountered by a woman militant in a world and a movement dominated by men. Perhaps this is why she did not leave much of a mark in the organizational history of anarchism, and why her greatest contribution was in her poetry and in her essays through which she translated the fears and hopes of the working people she lived with. For Voltairine de Cleyre ideologies and organizations should be means, and not ends, in the struggle for human fulfillment. So she moved from freethinking to socialism, to anarchism, sowing hope and reaping despair, but leaving behind her what Avrich calls "a true proletarian literature" — one which seems to be marked less by ideological concerns than by the suffering she shared with those oppressed people to whom she sought to bring a message of human hope.

Today, thanks to the remarkable progress made in the field of women's history one can more fully appreciate the significance of a radical life-experience such as that of de Cleyre. Likewise, the important

inroads made in recent years in the study of immigration and ethnicity have provided new insights into the attitudes and strategic choices made by radical leaders vis-à-vis immigrant workers. If one adds the crucial advances made in our knowledge of working-class culture and of the transformation of the work process, one can be optimistic about the potential of future biographical studies which are attuned with the class reality on which the personages in question acted. These studies too would help us in viewing "the failure of socialism" not merely as an academic question but rather as one that takes on a new relevance for this present generation.