



## MARX, ENGELS, AND AMERICA'S POLITICAL PARTIES

*by Seymour Martin Lipset*

The 1976 elections pointed up once again a singular fact about American politics: The United States is the only democratic industrialized nation in which not a single independent socialist or labor party representative holds elective office.

A study of the factors that have made this so offers some revealing insights into American society and the nature of our political parties.

Americans do not lack the opportunity to vote for socialists. On the ballot in various states in the 1976 elections were candidates of six different radical parties, ranging from the Socialist Labor Party, which has run presidential candidates since the late 19th century, to the Communist Party.\* None of these parties, however, polled as many as 100,000 votes nationally out of a total of close to 80 million. Altogether, they received less than one-quarter of 1 percent of the ballots cast.

The 1976 tally of American voter support for socialism represents what is close to the lowest point in a century-long series of attempts by diverse political activists to build a socialist movement in the United States.

The most successful election effort was that of the Socialist Party. Before World War I, the Party counted among its 125,000 members the leaders of many trade unions, including the carpenters, mine workers, iron workers, and brewery workers. The Party had elected over 1,000 public officials (the mayors of Berkeley, Milwaukee, Schenectady, and a number of other cities), state legislators, and two congressmen (Victor Berger in Wisconsin, and Meyer London in New York). Its perennial presidential candidate and leader, Eugene V. Debs, captured about 6 percent of the vote in 1912.

---

\*The others were the Socialist Party, a miniscule splinter of what was once a larger party of the same name; the U.S. Labor Party, an offshoot of a faction of the Students for a Democratic Society; the People's Party, a group calling themselves democratic socialists; and the Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyist organization.

---

Socialist Party strength declined after World War I, partly because of government reprisals for its antiwar agitation (Debs was jailed for almost three years for violating the Espionage Act) and partly because the Communists split the Party, pulling out many left-wing members to form an affiliate of Moscow's Third International. For several decades thereafter, the Socialists and Communists competed for the support of organized labor and the general public. The Great Depression of the 1930s produced gains for both groups. The Socialists under Norman Thomas's leadership won close to a million votes for President (2 percent) against Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover in 1932. The Communists were weaker electorally, but during the late 1930s, they acquired considerable strength among intellectuals and in the growing labor movement, particularly in the CIO.

Roosevelt's New Deal, however, made it impossible for either of these left-wing parties to build a permanent radical movement on the economic issues raised by the Depression. The Democrats supported a variety of planning and welfare measures designed to help the underprivileged and the unemployed and enacted legislation favorable to trade union growth, notably, the National Labor Relations Act. The Communist Party, following the international antifascist "popular front" policy laid down by Stalin, supported Roosevelt for re-election in 1936, as did many Socialists. Norman Thomas's presidential vote fell to well under 200,000 that year.

After World War II, neither the Communist nor the Socialist Party—nor any of the smaller splinter groups—was able to make much headway. The Communists rushed to join Henry Wallace's Progressive Party in 1948 and gained considerable organizational influence. Wallace received 1,150,000 votes, but in 1950 he resigned from the Party in protest against its pro-Soviet position on the Korean War.

The Socialist Party officially decided in the late '50s to

---

*Seymour Martin Lipset, 55, is professor of political science and sociology, Stanford University, and Senior Fellow of the University's Hoover Institution. Born in Harlem, he received his B.Sc. from the City College of New York (1943) and Ph.D. from Columbia (1949). He has taught at Harvard and Berkeley and is the author of Agrarian Socialism (1950, rev. 1968), Political Man (1960), Revolution and Counterrevolution (1963), The Politics of Unreason (with Earl Rabb, 1970), Rebellion in the University (1972, rev. 1976), The Divided Academy (with Everett Ladd, 1975), and Why No Socialism in the United States? (forthcoming).*

---

stop fielding presidential candidates on the grounds that the electoral system—focusing on the Presidency rather than the election of members of Parliament—made success impossible. Instead, it began to cooperate with trade unions in working for progressive major-party candidates, generally Democrats. Once again factionalism plagued the Socialists. By the early 1970s the Party had split into three groups:

*Socialist Party U.S.A.* Frank P. Zeidler, former mayor of Milwaukee, is the present national chairman; Beatrice Hermann is vice chairman. The Party believes in running candidates for national office but after 1956 did not do so until 1976, when the Party got on the ballot in seven states with a slate consisting of Chairman Zeidler and J. Quinn Brisben, a Chicago schoolteacher.

*Social Democrats U.S.A.* Bayard Rustin is national chairman, Carl Gershman, executive director; noteworthy members include Sidney Hook, John P. Roche, and Paul R. Porter. The Party is anti-Communist. It is very close to the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party and seeks to enhance the power of organized labor in American politics.

*Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC).* Michael Harrington, a member of the Socialist Party national executive committee from 1960 to 1972, is chairman of the DSOC, which is identified with the dissidents of organized labor and with the leftist New Politics. Its members include Representative Ronald Dellums, Democrat from Berkeley; a number of elected state officials; and presidents of two large unions, Jerry Wurf of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, and William Winpisinger of the International Association of Machinists.

The last two groups, working within the Democratic Party, supported Jimmy Carter for President in 1976. The Communists, driven underground by the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950 and the Communist Control Act of 1954, ran no candidates for national office from 1948 through 1964. In 1968, the Communist ticket, consisting of Charlene Mitchell and Michael Zagarell, received 1,075 votes. General-Secretary Gus Hall and Jarvis Tyner won 25,595 votes in 1972 and 58,992 in 1976.

The Socialist Workers Party of the Trotskyists ran national candidates throughout the 1960s and, though hardly a

---

significant minor party, consistently outdid the Communists at the polls, winning 41,388 votes in 1968 and 66,677 in 1972. In 1976, candidates Peter Camejo and Willie Mae Reid received 91,314. The current national secretary of the Socialist Workers Party is Jack Barnes. Barry Shepard is national organizational secretary.

The continued weakness of socialism in the United States, so manifest in 1976, has been a major embarrassment to Marxist theory. The theory assumes that the cultural superstructure, including political behavior, is a function of the underlying economic and technological structure. Thus, the class conflicts inherent in capitalism as a social system should inevitably lead to a working-class majority that achieves political consciousness as a revolutionary socialist party. According to Marx, in his preface to *Capital*, it follows logically that "the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future."

In short, the most developed society—the United States—should have the most advanced set of class and political relationships. Indeed, until the Russian Revolution, a number of major Marxist theorists, adhering to the logic of historical materialism, believed that the United States would be the first country in which socialists would come to power.

#### **American Exceptionalism**

During the late 19th century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels constantly looked for signs of class consciousness in the United States. Ironically, given the subsequent weakness of U.S. socialist and labor politics, Marx based his conviction—that the American working class would inevitably develop class-conscious politics dedicated to the abolition of capitalism—on his reading of "the first story of an organized political party of labor in the world's history."

Marx was referring to the Workingmen's Party, which won a good many votes in American cities in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Although the Party had disappeared by the mid-1830s, Marx and Engels, many decades later, were to remind deprecators of American radicalism that the Americans "have had, since 1829, their own social democratic school."

Yet, for close to a century and a half since the creation of the Workingmen's Party, the United States, almost alone among the industrial nations of the world, has frustrated all efforts to create a mass socialist or labor party—a fact that

---

has provoked a sizable literature by radical writers here and abroad, as well as by scholars seeking to explain "American exceptionalism" (the curious term that emerged in debates on the matter in the Communist International during the 1920s).

Paradoxically, in explaining the failure of Americans to support socialism, many socialists, like Marx and Engels themselves, suggest that the United States has been too progressive, egalitarian, and democratic to generate the massive radical or revolutionary movements found in European countries. Their explanations fall into two categories, not necessarily exclusive: One emphasizes societal factors, the other focuses on factors internal to the political system.

The societal factors are:

¶ The absence of a feudal tradition structuring politics along class lines.

¶ The predominant liberal tradition, which serves as a surrogate for socialism (Americans look upon their society as sufficiently egalitarian and democratic and see no need for drastic changes).

¶ The traditional emphasis on individualism and anti-statism, deriving from revolutionary values that imply support for decentralized radicalism, rather than for a strong collectivist state.

¶ A steady rise in living standards, particularly of the working class, in conjunction with the considerable increase in the proportion of the gross national product received by less-privileged classes in modern times (U.S. workers have lived better than workers elsewhere since the Civil War).

¶ The shift to large-scale economic organization that has accompanied growth in productivity, with the concomitant increase in middle-level positions and the resultant increase in upward mobility that followed the spread of educational opportunities.

¶ Inhibition of the formation of class-consciousness by the individual American's propensity for geographic movement and the resulting lack of stable community roots.

¶ Factors traceable to a multiethnic, multiracial immigrant society, including: ethnic, religious, and racial tensions within the working class; resistance to socialist appeals by the Catholic Church, to which a very large proportion of the white working class has belonged since the late 19th century; and

---

continued immigration, which encourages upward mobility by native-born whites (immigrants until the 1930s—and blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and new immigrants since then—have filled the least well-paid jobs, enabling native-born whites to occupy the more privileged positions).

The political factors that have prevented the development of socialism in the United States on a large scale are:

¶ Universal suffrage (the U.S. “masses,” unlike those of most of Europe, attained universal suffrage prior to efforts to organize them into class-conscious parties).

¶ The constitutional and electoral system (the concentration of executive power and leadership in a President rather than in a Cabinet responsible to Parliament, together with the primary system of nomination, encourages a two-party coalition system in presidential elections and the formation of ideologically heterogeneous congressional parties).

¶ The flexibility of this coalition system, which makes it possible for the major parties to respond to pervasive discontent by stealing the thunder and adopting some of the policies of socialists.

¶ The emergence of movements rather than a third party in social crises (almost invariably, the response of the major parties to such movements reduces the potential base for institutionalized radical parties).\*

¶ Periodic government attacks on syndicalist, socialist, and communist movements, which have broken the continuity of radical protest.

Efforts to demonstrate the validity of many interpretations of American exceptionalism are based on comparative studies. The most influential such study, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) by political theorist Louis Hartz, is historical and sociological. It places the United States in a category

---

\*To a large degree, this predilection for movements is related to the Protestant character of the country, the majority of whose inhabitants adhere to Protestant sects as distinct from churches (such as the established state churches of Europe). From this flows the Protestant sectarian phenomenon of conscientious objection to war, not to mention anti-Catholic and Nativist crusades and moralist drives relating to drinking, gambling, and sex. Of course, there have been persistent minor parties, which seek to promote a particular doctrine (the Socialist Party, the Prohibition Party), as well as transient third-party movements that arise in response to economic problems (the Populists of 1892, the Progressives of 1924). In addition, secessionist forces have attacked both major parties (Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Movement in 1912, the Dixiecrat or States' Rights revolt of 1948). In 1968, the American Independence Party, led by George Wallace, secured 13 percent of the vote by appealing, in part, to a white racial “backlash.”

What the downbreak of Russian Czarism would be for the great military monarchies of Europe—the snapping of their mainstay—that is for the bourgeois of the whole world the breaking out of class war in America. For America after all is the ideal of all bourgeois: a country rich, vast, expanding, with purely bourgeois institutions unleavened by feudal remnants of monarchical traditions, and without a permanent and hereditary proletariat. . . . And because there were not, *as yet*, classes with opposing interests, our—and your—bourgeois thought that America stood above class antagonisms and struggles. That delusion has at last broken down, the last Bourgeois Paradise on earth is fast changing into a Purgatorio.

*Friedrich Engels, Letters to Americans 1848–1895*

of overseas “fragment” societies formed in the Americas and Australasia by European settlers. The fragment concept is based on the fact that the groups that emigrated from European countries to settle abroad were only parts—or fragments—of the mother cultures.\*

### **The Anti-State**

These new societies developed very differently. They were not affected by many important European values and institutions, usually those associated with the privileged classes, the aristocracy, and the monarchy. Each immigrant group left behind in Europe an age-old source of conservative ideology in the form of its traditional class structure.

Some light on the relevance of this analysis may have been cast by British Socialist H. G. Wells 70 years ago in his book *The Future in America*. In discussing the weakness of socialism and class-consciousness in the United States, Wells noted that the country not only was without a strong socialist party, but it lacked a true national conservative or Tory party as well. The Democratic and Republican Parties both resemble the middle-class Liberal Party of England, which he called

---

\*Hartz argued that it was impossible to build an ideological Left in the liberal fragment cultures because there was no hereditary aristocracy against which to rebel and because the philosophical bases on which an ideological Left might be founded were already institutionalized as part of the liberal and radical tradition of America.

---

the party of industrialism and freedom. "There are no Tories to represent the feudal system," he wrote, "and no Labor Party. . . . All Americans are, from the English point of view, Liberals of one sort or another." Moreover, America was pure 18th century, and 18th-century liberalism was "essentially the rebellion of the modern industrial organization against the monarchial and aristocratic State—against hereditary privilege, against restrictions on bargains. . . . Its spirit was essentially Anarchistic—the antithesis of Socialism. It was the anti-State."

The argument that socialism is weak here because the United States is the purest example of a non-European, nonaristocratic society—a pure "bourgeois," pure liberal, born-modern society—is, of course, not limited to the work of Louis Hartz and other contemporary analysts of U.S. and Canadian politics. One may find a variant of this thesis in the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, all of whom considered the United States to be the product of the most modern, most purely bourgeois, and most democratic of world cultures. However, as the American socialist theoretician Michael Harrington has noted, they seemed to argue that one of the difficulties was that "America was too socialist for socialism."

Friedrich Engels believed that socialism was weak in the United States "just *because* America is so purely bourgeois, so entirely without a feudal past and therefore proud of its purely bourgeois organization."

Lenin also stressed the freedom and high status of workers in the United States. He described the country in 1908 as "in many respects the model and ideal of our bourgeois civilization . . . (without rival in) the extent of political freedom and the cultural level of the masses of the population."

### **The Bourgeoisie Triumphant**

A year earlier, Lenin had pointed out that the weakness of socialism in America stemmed from "the absence of any big, nationwide *democratic* tasks facing the proletariat." Political freedom in America had produced "the complete subjection of the proletariat to bourgeois policy; the sectarian isolation of the (socialist) groups . . . not the slightest success of the Socialists among the working masses in the elections." American socialism was weak precisely because it was dealing with "the most firmly established democratic systems, which con-



---

front the proletariat with purely socialist tasks.”

To reverse Lenin's phrase, European socialism was much stronger because it could appeal to the workers for support, not only on purely socialist but also on democratic issues.

In the 1920s, Antonio Gramsci, one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party and perhaps the most important non-Russian theoretician of the communist movement, cited America's unique origins and resultant value system as the source of its exceptional political and technological systems. Despite his Marxist credentials, Gramsci placed more emphasis on the role of America's values—than on its “so-called natural wealth”—in producing a society that differed so much from that of Europe.

During the decade he spent in Mussolini's prisons (1927–37), he produced a broad patchwork of writings that must be considered a major contribution to post-Leninist Marxist philosophy. A significant portion of these writings were subsequently translated into English and published as *Prison Notebooks* (1973) and *Letters from Prison* (1973). Essentially, Gramsci explained in *Prison Notebooks*, American society had been formed by

pioneers, protagonists of the political and religious struggles in England, defeated but not humiliated or laid low in their country of origin. They import in America . . . a certain stage of European historical evolution, which, when transplanted . . . into the virgin soil of America, continues to develop the forces implicit in its nature but with an incomparably more rapid rhythm than in Old Europe, where there exists a whole series of checks (moral, intellectual, political, economic, incorporated in specific sections of the population, relics of past regimes which refuse to die out).

According to Gramsci, America's unique sociological background resulted in what he called Americanism—pure rationalism without any of the class values derived from feudalism. Americanism, he claimed, was not simply a way of life but an ideology. Americans, regardless of class, emphasized the rewards and virtues of hard work and the need to exploit the riches of nature.

Since 1929, other analysts,\* like Gramsci, have put forth

---

\*Among them, Hermann Keyserling, the conservative German aristocrat; Leon Samson, the American socialist intellectual; Sidney Hook, the socialist philosopher; Michael Harrington, former Socialist Party leader; and Carl Degler, American historian.

---

or accepted the argument that socialism as a political movement is weak in the United States because the ideological content of Americanism, apart from questions of property ownership, is highly similar to socialism, and Americans believe they already have most of what socialism promises.

### Electoral Systems

The Canadian academic socialist Kenneth W. McNaught recently argued that explanations of the differences between the United States and Canada or Europe that are based solely on sociological and specific historical factors are incomplete. He would stress, instead, the political consequences of the American Constitution and its evolution.

The thesis that the Constitution has helped ensure the failure of third parties of any stripe in the United States is a very old one. It was the first item on a list of factors preventing the growth in America of a third, workers' party, drawn up by Engels in 1893. The U.S. Constitution, he stated, "causes any vote for any candidate not put up by one of the two governing parties to appear to be *lost*. And the American . . . wants to influence his state; he does not throw his vote away."

After more than half a century of disappointments at the polls, two recent leaders of the Socialist Party of the United States, the late Norman Thomas and Michael Harrington, also came to accept electoral factors as an explanation of the general failure of third parties.

In 1938, Thomas, recognizing the weakness of the Socialist Party, suggested that U.S. Socialists hurt their cause by running Independent candidates for President. By the '50s and '60s he had reluctantly come to the conclusion that his Party's experience demonstrated the futility of third parties in America, a view that a majority of Socialist Party members eventually accepted.

The alternative strategy for American socialists and other radicals, given the electoral difficulties, has been to operate as a faction within one of the major coalition parties. The absence of any strong party discipline in Congress and the system of nominating candidates in state primaries clearly makes this possible.

This strategy was tried with considerable success by A. C. Townley, a leader of the Socialist Party in North Dakota. Believing that wheatbelt farmers were ready to accept socialist policies, Townley formed the Non-Partisan League in

---

1915. It called for a farmers' alliance "to grapple with organized 'big business' greed."

The League proposed government ownership and control of various enterprises. Townley and his colleagues decided to capture the region's dominant, farmer-based Republican Party by entering a League slate of candidates in the primaries.

In 1916, in its first election contest, the League was instrumental in electing Lynn J. Frazier governor of North Dakota. They also backed the winning top state officials, all of whom ran on the G.O.P. ticket. After winning control of both houses of the state legislature in 1918, the League enacted a large part of its program into law, establishing a state bank, a home-building association to loan money at low rates of interest, a graduated state income tax that distinguished earned from unearned income, and a state hail insurance fund. They also passed a workmen's compensation act that assessed employers for support and acts establishing an eight-hour day for working women and regulating working conditions in the coal mines.

Many Socialists thought that Townley had betrayed them by discarding the party label, but others openly supported him and looked on the Non-Partisan League as a bona fide socialist organization.

### **Socialism in The Dakotas**

Later, by organizing the wheat farmers who shipped grain to Minneapolis and St. Paul, the League was able to enroll more than 200,000 members. In Minnesota, after losing in the Republican primary, Non-Partisan League candidates ran successfully as Independents and helped found the Farmer Labor Party, which elected many state officials, including governors and U.S. senators until it merged with the Democrats in 1944.

The Non-Partisan League never had the electoral success elsewhere that it had in North Dakota, but in South Dakota the Republican Party adopted much of the League's program, setting up a state rural credit system, a state-owned coal mine, and a state cement plant, and promising that if state-owned flour mills and packing plants were successful in North Dakota, South Dakota would adopt them as well. An offshoot of the Non-Partisan League won power in Oklahoma in the early 1920s, electing a governor and many legislators on the Democratic ticket. It, too, had been established largely by former members of the Socialist Party.

The strategy of building a socialist faction to run a slate

of candidates in a Democratic or Republican primary was followed with some success in the 1930s on the West Coast. Upton Sinclair, who had been active in the Socialist Party since the turn of the century, had run as a Socialist for governor of California in 1932 and had received 50,000 votes. He decided to try his luck within the state's Democratic Party and formed the independent EPIC (End Poverty in California) movement, which ran a full slate in the Democratic primaries in 1934.

Sinclair won the Democratic nomination for governor, and EPIC candidates were nominated for both houses of the U.S. Congress and for the state legislature. In the ensuing general election, Sinclair received close to 900,000 votes but was defeated by the extremely well-financed Republican opposition. However, Sheridan Downey, the EPIC candidate for U.S. senator, was elected.

In nearby Oregon and Washington, groups calling themselves the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the name used by Canadian socialists, entered the Democratic primaries and scored some successes; several Federation congressmen were elected as Democrats from the state of Washington. No comparable efforts, however, were organized elsewhere, and these movements gradually disintegrated with the coming of World War II.

During the late 1930s, the U.S. Communist Party, under orders from Moscow to cooperate with all left-of-center elements to build an antifascist "popular front," worked within the Democratic Party. Earl Browder, Communist leader at the time, has since pointed out that the Socialists did not believe that it was possible to participate as an organized group within the heterogeneous Democratic coalition and that they failed to learn any lessons "from the spectacular capture of the [California] Democratic Party primary in 1934 by Upton Sinclair's EPIC Movement."

### **Lessons of the Thirties**

As a result, the Socialist Party, which had been stronger than the Communists while both were operating as conventional third parties, lost ground steadily. By the middle of the '30s, Browder wrote, "the positions of the two parties were reversed, the Communists had the upper hand in all circles that considered themselves left of the New Deal."

Michael Harrington, Thomas's successor (in 1968) as leader of the Socialist Party, in discussing the success of the

---

Communists in the 1930s and again during World War II, noted sadly that if the Socialists had only followed a similar policy, they might have built the largest and most successful socialist movement in American history.

The considerable strength the Communists obtained within the labor movement and the Democratic Party was, of course, destroyed by their great handicap—fealty to the international Communist line, whose changes were dictated by Moscow. In 1939, the Hitler-Stalin Pact isolated the U.S. Party, and it lost much of the support it had won from 1936 on, particularly among intellectuals. Again in 1948, renewed hard-line tactics dictated by the emerging Cold War broke the Party's links to the Democrats that had been revived during World War II and forced many adherents, especially labor leaders, to choose between a loss of their influence in unions and in the Democratic Party and their membership in, or ties to, the Communist Party.

Thus, American radicals have occasionally succeeded in building up socialist and communist influence *within* one of the two-party coalitions. These successes underscore the fact that one must examine the ideological forces within the Republican and Democratic parties for traces of the political tendencies that commonly exist as separate parties in other countries.

In recent years, a number of scholars have suggested that the welfare-state, pro-labor politics adopted by the Democratic Party since the 1930s constitutes a U.S. equivalent of the Social Democratic and Labour Parties of the British Commonwealth and those of Northern Europe. As historian David Shannon puts it:

The British and Scandinavian political arms of labor pay homage to socialism in the abstract, but they in fact have put their main emphasis on welfare state features such as unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and national health plans. American labor, with only a few exceptions, has failed to pay homage to socialism in the abstract, but it has, in fact, put a major political emphasis on gaining welfare state objectives.\*

In *Labor in American Politics* (1969), labor historian J. David Greenstone noted that "in their support of the

---

\*David Shannon, "Socialism and Labor," in C. Vann Woodward, ed., *The Comparative Approach to American History*, New York: Basic Books, 1968, p. 241.

---

Democrats as a mass, pro-welfare state party, American trade unions have forged a political coalition with important—although hardly complete—structural and behavioral similarities to the Socialist Party—trade union alliances of Western Europe.”

The turning point in the emergence of what Michael Harrington has described as America’s “invisible mass movement” was, of course, the alliance of the New Deal with Big Labor, which, as Richard Hofstadter wrote in *Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (1967), “gave the New Deal a social democratic tinge that had never been present in American reform movements.”

Since the 1930s, the alliance between labor and the Democrats has grown; the national Democratic Party has become a supporter of state intervention and planning in economic affairs, and the AFL-CIO officially calls for federal policies resembling those advocated before World War I by the Socialist Party, policies which the AFL rejected at the time. In his book *Socialism* (1972), Harrington states that labor, through its political action committees had “created a social democratic party, with its own apparatus and program, within the Democratic Party.” Indeed, AFL-CIO President George Meany on several occasions has accepted the description of his organization’s political program as socialist.

Harrington is careful to distinguish between *social democracy*, which he perceives as “an independent, class-based political movement with a far-ranging program for the democratization of the economy and the society” and *socialism*, which involves the elimination of private capitalism. As he sees it, America now has a powerful social democracy comparable to those in other Western industrialized countries, but no effective socialist party or movement dedicated, even in theory, to the radical transformation of the economic order.

The key question then is not “Why does socialist ideology exist in Europe, but not in the United States?” but “Why does labor representation take on an explicitly *class* form in northern Europe and a populist, *multiclass* form in the United States?”

In one sense, the answer has been given: The United States does have a mass social democratic movement in the form of the liberal, trade union, welfare-state wing of the Democratic Party. This assumes that the constitutional and electoral systems inhibit the formation of viable third parties, while permitting factionalism within the major parties.

---

Yet it is clear that however grandly one describes the social democratic force in American politics, it is much weaker than the social democratic, labor, or communist parties of Europe and Australasia. In Canada, which sociologically is somewhat similar to the United States, we also find a relatively weak social democratic party (the New Democratic Party, known as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation from 1932 to 1961). Both countries are also low on other indicators of class-consciousness and conflict. In every other Western democratic nation, except possibly France, the percentage of the nonagricultural labor force belonging to trade unions is much higher. The figures for Canada and the United States are about 28 and 24.5 percent; for Britain, 48 percent; for Germany, 38; for Denmark, 58; for Australia, 53; for Austria, Belgium, Israel, and Sweden, over 65 percent. The low rates for the Latin countries, particularly France and Italy (23 and 33 percent), appear to be the result of a quite different format of unionism, characterized by ideologically competitive union centers.

In both Canada and the United States, relatively egalitarian status structures, achievement-oriented value systems, affluence, the absence of a European aristocratic or feudal past, and a history of political democracy prior to industrialization have all operated to produce cohesive systems that remain unreceptive to proposals for major structural change. As M.I.T. political scientist Walter Dean Burnham has emphasized, "No feudalism, no socialism: with these four words one can summarize the basic sociocultural realities that underlie American electoral politics in the industrial era."\*

The evidence indicates that H. G. Wells and Louis Hartz were correct in their evaluation of the impact of North America's unique history and culture on the prospects for socialism and class solidarity. The environment has simply not been supportive of ideological and class-oriented politics any less broad or more focused than those now offered by the two major coalition parties. Whether those two parties can retain the inner discipline and cohesiveness necessary for the performance of their traditional roles is another matter.

---

\*"The United States: The Politics of Heterogeneity," in Richard Rose, ed., *Electoral Behavior: A Comparative Handbook*, New York: Free Press, 1974.