Why is There “No Socialism” in the United States?
A Historical and Institutional Examination

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Important and complex distinctions separate American politics and the American left from their international counterparts. Karl Marx, in 1879, remarked that working-class revolution in the United States would be “the natural outcome of the country’s development,” given its advanced separation of labor and capital in the industrial age. Yet today, American political culture remains markedly capitalistic. By 1939, sixty years after Marx’s death, Leon Trotsky would lament, “In the United States, where a man who owns a million is referred to as being ‘worth’ a million, market concepts have sunk in deeper than anywhere else.”

Seymour Martin Lipset characterizes America’s lack of socialism, in particular, as “a major embarrassment to Marxist theory,” because the nation where capitalism became strongest and most advanced “should have the most advanced set of class and political relationships,” and yet it does not. As sociologist Daniel Bell observed, “In the most advanced capitalist country of the world, there has been no Labor Party, little corporate class consciousness, and feeble intellectual leadership from the Left.”

This problem is the essence of what Lipset and others have characterized as ‘American Exceptionalism’. The United States has never had a major, mass-membership political party that, like “old Labour” for example, advocated common ownership or nationalization of means of production, a common feature of pre-1950s social-democratic party programs.

The construction of America’s welfare state has been far more sporadic than in Western Europe, and social spending remains well below average among developed countries.

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1 Interview with Karl Marx, *Chicago Tribune* (1879).
4 Lipset, “Marx, Engels,” 93.
8 OECD (2010) Social Expenditure Database
Skocpol’s words, today “the United States has never come close to having a ‘modern welfare state’ in the British, the Swedish, or any other positive Western sense of the phrase,” despite having at times been a leader in developing such ideas.⁹

Even as early as 1906, before concepts like the ‘welfare state’ or the ‘Nordic model’ entered the lexicon, German sociologist Werner Sombart took notice of the same “embarrassment” that Lipset notes today. In his famous work Why is there no Socialism in the United States? Sombart declared, excitedly:

> here at last is a country with no Socialism, despite its having the most advanced capitalist development. The doctrine of the inevitable Socialist future is refuted by the facts...nothing can be more important than to get to the root of this phenomenon.¹⁰

To explain these differences it is tempting to ask, as Sombart and countless others have, “why is there no socialism in the United States?”

However, this line of questioning can quickly break down. As Eric Foner explains, the question “rests upon an interpretation that accords socialism a privileged position...because it arises inexorably out of the inner logic of capitalist development, and holds out the promise of a far-reaching social revolution,” yet the absence often being sought is not of socialism, but of successful social-democratic and labor parties at the level of national government.¹¹

As history shows, looking at these factors as forces for social revolution can be highly disappointing. It may even be argued, just as problematically, that because of this distinction the absence to be explained is not of socialism, but merely of higher degrees of progressive

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liberalism in the policymaking process.\textsuperscript{12} If no country in Western Europe has actually achieved true socialism, then why should the United States be held to a higher standard?

Foner concludes that the question of ‘why is there no socialism’ is itself “fundamentally flawed,” because of its faulty assumptions. The Marxist basis of the question conflicts with what is being asked; the explanations focus on the absence of social-democratic political parties, such as those in Europe nations which have not achieved socialism at all.\textsuperscript{13} Instead, Foner believes, these organizations have “promoted liberalism and egalitarianism…more analogous to American political parties” than their supporters would like to think.\textsuperscript{14} The “underlying premise” of the question is, therefore, American exceptionalism, because it assumes that American development is fundamentally different. Foner would like to remind us that socialism may be just as absent from Europe as it is from America, depending on the standard set.

Because it is so hard to identify what ‘socialism’ refers to today, Foner suggests that the question of “why is there no socialism?” really serves to ask: “why is the United States the only advanced capitalist nation whose political system lacks a social democratic presence and whose working class lacks socialist class consciousness?”\textsuperscript{15} Although he finds this question more plausible, he still finds the premise flawed, because it is based in the first place on a heavily romanticized understanding of working-class politics in Western Europe.

To fully reflect upon the reasons for the relatively large influence of capital in the economy, society and politics of the United States, it is important to consider the degree to which radical social change can is possible through democratic and political means. In Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s view, socialists and social democrats must determine “whether, and under what

\textsuperscript{13} Foner, 73-4.
\textsuperscript{14} Foner, 74.
\textsuperscript{15} Foner, 59.
conditions, the class divisions and social inequalities produced by capitalism can be undone by parliamentary democracy.”

In this regard, there are in fact several “things” that are distinctive to the United States, which alter the answer to this question. To truly explain the phenomena the question of “Why is there no socialism in the United States” seeks to understand, four underlying questions must be answered. First, why has there been little expressly socialist presence in American politics and the American labor movement—in other words, why has America’s mainstream center-left been limited to a social-liberal, rather than social-democratic, ideological framework?

This leads to questions of whether the United States is historically stuck within a narrow liberal tradition, as Hartz argued, and why reform has taken place primarily through a labor-liberal coalition similar to that of Britain before 1945. However, as Foner argues, it is hardly self-evident that “socialism” in Europe goes much further than this, despite the postwar proliferation of social-democratic governments. Despite this, it is clear that socialist ideology has had little place in the American political discourse. This may be due to a liberal tradition as Hartz argues, however, a more empirically-grounded argument has also taken hold, which argues that this is more a product of a compromised settlement among sectional interests than a coherent ideological tradition.

Second, why has class been, historically, such a weak basis for American political organization, in comparison to other developed countries? Somewhat related to the no-socialist-party question, this question addresses the fact that, while class has had some effect on partisan

17 Foner, 74.
voting, ethnic and cultural issues have often been an equally strong basis of party-political coalitions.

Third, why did a strong social-democratic or labor party fail to develop during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when economic turmoil, followed by soaring profits, should have catalyzed its formation? Internal explanations, such as those outlined by Foner, examine the failures of socialist party organizing, and the perceived conservatism of American trade unionists; however, another focuses on the American political system, and the early establishment of two large party and thus, existing partisan loyalties among working-class voters.  

Finally, why does the United States lack a comprehensive welfare state similar to those commonly found in Western Europe? Scholars who have asked the question of “why is there no socialism” have often pointed to the absence of such a welfare state as the dependent variable whose failure indicates a corresponding failure of socialism. However, this assumption depends on a specifically social-democratic explanation for social legislation, which scholars, such as Rodgers, have questioned, or like Skocpol, rejected outright.

Although none of these questions is a complete stand-in for the question of why there is no socialism, taken together they point in the direction of understanding the broader problem for the American left, and its presumed failure throughout United States history.

**Why Does the United States Lack a Socialist Ideological Tradition?**

The mainstream reform ideology in American politics has been one of social liberalism, rather than social democracy. These ideologies, as Whitehead, King and Ritter explain, are mainly distinguished from each other in the respect that American liberals “have referred to the

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diffusion of equity ownership as a further symptom of the democratic and inclusive nature of the U.S. market economy,” and that they accordingly “seem to think more in terms of the extension of private, individual ownership rights in the market than in terms of collective, institutional, and social entitlements.”

In Europe, social democrats’ Marxist intellectual heritage often led them to view social welfare as a central component of the workers’ emancipation—providing them a right to exist outside the market, and with dignity. Esping-Andersen notes that Karl Marx, Karl Kautsky, and Rosa Luxemburg all agreed, upon a close reading, that such reforms were worthwhile because reforms lessened the powerlessness of workers and thus gave momentum to the historical movement towards socialism:

In general, revolutionary and reformist theories both agreed on the necessity and desirability of struggling for the right to a social income outside of wage labor. What divided the reformist and revolutionary wings of socialism was mainly the issue of strategy.

There is also the economic matter that workers can afford to make more demands and go on strike if they have easily accessible income supports apart from their private employer, enabling a more militant stance. While U.S. unemployment insurance has always been a pittance, most Western European economies came to provide almost full wage replacement by the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, an important question when measuring the effectiveness of social-democratic politics is the degree to which wage labor is the worker’s choice. This concern is largely absent from New Deal goals and labor-liberal ideology.

Foner reviews various alternative explanations for the property-accommodating populism that has dominated in the United States. First is the success of American capitalism. According

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21 Esping-Andersen, 44.
22 Esping-Andersen, 23.
to this thesis, for a long time, the abundance of land—the “great safety-valve,” in Engels’s words—and agrarian predominance, kept the great mass of people from being forced to sell their labour to capitalists.\(^{23}\) As the German Marxist Karl Kautsky pointed out in 1906, while the Crown helped to rack-rent English peasants off their lands and into the factories, American farmers faced no such attack; therefore the development of modern American capitalism presented less urgent conditions to the new working class in America.\(^{24}\) America as a whole was simply too rich, and American workers were far better off than European workers under capitalism.

The “working class” was not so sharply set apart from the “middle class” as it was in Britain, and a strong ideology of social mobility prevented the kind of resentment that would fuel a political movement.\(^{25}\) Immigration from Europe into the major cities changed this relationship to an extent, but the vastness of the continent, and the broader geographic reach of agrarian production, proved a stumbling block to the kinds of socialist movements that would arise in urban, proletarian conditions. The federal structure of the nation and the geographic basis of representation also meant that any class-based mass movement would be at first relegated to a sectional interest.

**Hartz Blames the Liberal Tradition**

Louis Hartz, in order to explain the uniqueness of American New-Deal liberalism, made the claim that, “[As] the New Deal shows, when you simply ‘solve problems’ on the basis of a submerged and absolute liberal faith, you can depart from Locke with a kind of inventive

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\(^{25}\) Ibid.
freedom."

In other words, this is just another quirk brought to us by the liberal consensus; likewise, this view holds that Hartz’s theory must explain the lack of a coherent socialist or social-democratic ideology in twentieth century America.

The Hartz thesis, which Foner sums up as, “No feudalism, no socialism,” addresses sectionalism and integration, although in ways that may be seriously deficient in both.

Nationalism is one major factor in Hartz’s analysis: the liberal tradition exists because it is critical to America’s self-perception; as he poses the problem, “Could America live by calling Andrew Jackson ‘petty bourgeois’?”

This applies not just to America, but to countries such as Canada and Australia, which also broke away from Britain. The “fragmentation” of America from Britain in 1776, Hartz argues, resulted in “over three hundred years of liberal immobility,” because it was removed from Europe and the feudal traditions to which socialism partly developed as a response. This lack of a feudal tradition, in his view, means that the United States “lacks a genuine revolutionary tradition,” as well as lacking a genuine conservative tradition. This is the source of what he determines to be a consensus of liberalism.

Hartz’s theory in many ways draws him into direct conflict with Karl Marx, who himself had believed that this lack of a feudal past meant there was a more purely capitalist upper class. American workers were therefore more “decisive” because they could more easily locate clear class relationships without having to sort through the economic and ideological vestiges of the old order that coexisted with the European bourgeoisie.

In addition, Engels observed that America was especially “favored soil” for socialism, for the same reasons Hartz believed it was

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26 Hartz, The Liberal Tradition, 10.
27 Foner, 61.
29 Hartz, Founding, 4.
30 Hartz, Liberal Tradition, 5.
31 “Interview with Karl Marx,” Chicago Tribune, January 5 1879, marxists.org
not: “no medieval ruins bar the way…history begins with the elements of modern bourgeois society, as evolved in the seventeenth century”—in his view, America’s advanced, liberal traditions meant its workers were closer to their historical destiny.\textsuperscript{32}

As Hartz argues, there are two main characteristics of European socialism that do not translate into the American context. First, the corporatist emphasis on ‘solidarity’ is lost on Americans because “socialism seeks to recapture the memory of the organic medieval community” from the “new liberal absolutisms” it is buried under, and this community never existed in the United States.\textsuperscript{33} More famously, Hartz argues that the absence of feudalism in American history has robbed its people of class consciousness, “the spirit of revolt against the hierarchical nature of the feudal community which these inveterate individualists lack.”\textsuperscript{34} However, it is important to note the contradiction here: Hartz proposes simultaneously that socialism depends on a yearning for the communal structures of feudalism, as well as a yearning to revolt against them.

**Hartz’s Southern Reaction**

Hartz does attempt to ward off a possible southern challenge to his argument, particularly the presence of a pre-capitalist culture of plantation aristocracy. In his essay on “The Reactionary Enlightenment,” studies the conservative writings of the antebellum South, particularly those with a heavily feudal flavor—the “Tory socialist attack on the North.”\textsuperscript{35} He takes particular interest in the corporatist elements of these pro-slavery arguments, apparent imitations of Disraeli-style Toryism. In his view, however, these are poor imitations, foiled by their

\textsuperscript{32} Friedrich Engels, Preface, 242.
\textsuperscript{33} Hartz, _Founding_, 35.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Louis Hartz, “The Reactionary Enlightenment: Southern Political Thought Before the Civil War,” _The Western Political Quarterly_ 5, no. 1, (1952), 46.
contradictions, not truly representative of a departure from the liberal tradition. In this he finds he is able to conclude that, just as these “conservatives” cannot truly separate themselves from the liberal tradition, there can be no socialist tradition either.\textsuperscript{36}

Hartz takes particular interest in the figure of George Fitzhugh, who wrote of the industrial north with alarm, that “under this system the rich are continually growing richer and the poor poorer… true as well between nations as between individuals.”\textsuperscript{37} This quotation of Fitzhugh bears a superficial similarity to Disraeli’s lamentations from one decade earlier, that the rich and poor lived as “Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy.”\textsuperscript{38}

Fitzhugh likewise decries the cruelties wrought by industrialization and the northern adherence to liberal economic ideology:

Adam Smith's philosophy is simple…that individual well-being and social and national wealth and prosperity will be best promoted by each man's eagerly pursuing his own selfish welfare unfettered and unrestricted by legal regulations… His friends and acquaintances were of that class…His country, too, England and Scotland…But there was another and much larger world, whose misfortunes, under his system, were to make the fortunes of his friends and his country…they were the unemployed poor, the weak in mind or body, the simple and unsuspicious, the prodigal, the dissipated, the improvident and the vicious.\textsuperscript{39}

Aside from the condescension towards the lower classes, Fitzhugh here advances critique of \textit{laissez-faire} that sounds almost progressive. He does so, however, with the most reactionary intentions, defending feudal principles in service of the institution of slavery. He laments the death of older forms of society, where “The reciprocal duties and obligations of master and slave, of lord and vassal, of priest and layman, to each other, were altogether unlike those that should be practiced between the free and equal citizens of regenerated society.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{36} Hartz, “Reactionary Enlightenment,” 49.
\textsuperscript{37} George Fitzhugh, \textit{Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society} (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1854), 13.
\textsuperscript{38} Benjamin Disraeli, \textit{Sybil; or the Two Nations} (London: Henry Colburn, 1845), 149-50.
\textsuperscript{39} Fitzhugh, 12.
\textsuperscript{40} Fitzhugh, 9.
Hartz finds a relation to Toryism only in that, for Fitzhugh, “The ‘affection’ between slave and master was one of the finest things about Southern life,” just as Disraeli would later proclaim that the “sympathy between classes which is a distinctive feature of the present day” would promote legislation benefitting the working classes.42

Confusingly, Fitzhugh’s critique sounds almost Marxian in many respects. As Marx had observed in *The German Ideology*, the expanding world market

Through universal competition…forced every individual to the utmost exertion…Wherever possible it destroyed ideology, religion, morality…it destroyed all the naturalness within labour and dissolved all natural relations into money relations…It completed the victory of the city over the countryside.”43

It was this victory of the northern city over the southern countryside, so to speak, that so alarmed Fitzhugh, and by threatening the economically backward institution of slavery, alarmed white southerners as a whole. It was in this loss of “naturalness” in labor and work that he found a foothold in which to hold up an argument based on the organic rightness of the feudal order, which he locates in the plantation aristocracy.

The patriarchal character of Fitzhugh’s attempt at reviving feudalism reveals another striking similarity with Karl Marx, who observed that the relationship between workers and their superiors “very soon lost almost all its patriarchal colouring” with the advent of capitalist society.44 In this, where Marx sees this as a historical advancement, Fitzhugh sees it as the destruction of a treasured institution.

Hartz ultimately dismisses the reactionary tradition of southern theorists such as Fitzhugh and Calhoun, because of their many contradictions. Most importantly, they fail to overcome the

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41 Hartz, “Reactionary Enlightenment,” 46.
42 Disraeli, *Speech at the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, April 3, 1872* (University of Bristol Library), 21.
44 Marx, *German Ideology*, 160.
American liberal tradition because in Hartz’s view it is just that: tradition. In order to maintain their conservative posture they default onto traditions of American society that are in fact liberal. Therefore, in Hartz’s view,

The political thought of the Civil War symbolizes not the weakness of the American liberal idea but its strength…The strange agonies the Southerners endured when they tried to break out of the grip of Locke and the way the nation greeted their effort stand as a permanent testimony to the power of that idea. It is not every day in Western history that a “great conservative reaction” dies without impact on the mind of a nation.\(^45\)

In terms of historical memory, the American tradition really has no place for someone like Fitzhugh. Because our “conservatives” are really liberal, a true reactionary, with affections for pre-liberal European traditionalism, has no place in this nation’s political tradition and thus fades into obscurity. If there had been anything novel or worth saving from this intellectual tradition, Hartz concludes, it would have survived the Civil War.\(^46\)

**Critical Views on the Liberal Tradition**

Rogers Smith offers a critique that Hartz’s example is “misleading,” because Fitzhugh is atypical of southern intellectuals of his era:

Hartz correctly presented Fitzhugh as a “romantic nationalist”…Fitzhugh elaborated an ‘organic’, paternalistic view of society that exalted slavery as beneficial for workers of any race…Many other defenders of slavery instead embraced the scientific and religious doctrines of racial hierarchy.\(^47\)

One could argue that this intellectual tradition, however, does offer some explanation for the peculiar political development of the United States. It was the outgrowth of a society whose failure to integrate into the nation has had lasting implications for social class in American

\(^{45}\) Hartz, “Reactionary Enlightenment,” 50.
\(^{46}\) Hartz, “Reactionary Enlightenment,” 47.
\(^{47}\) Rogers M. Smith, “Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: the Multiple Traditions in America,” *The American Political Science Review*, 87, no. 3, 553.
politics. Hartz seems to argue that because historians, like himself, have trouble conceiving of a place for this intellectual tradition in their broader conception of American history, it therefore does not matter—that the existence of these thinkers poses no serious challenge to the view that American history is ultimately characterized by a liberal consensus. As Hartz’s critics have long pointed out, this assumption is hardly self-evident; Smith and others, such as Bensel, give constant examples which demonstrate the equal influence of illiberal ideologies alongside liberal ones in American political development. As historian Mark Hulliung has argued, “Nothing is more misleading than the claim that John Locke won an easy, preordained victory in American history.”

Hartz’s method of analysis fell out of favor by the 1980s because it seemed to ignore movements of historically disenfranchised sections of American society. Foner finds that the “new labor and social history” is a problem for Hartz’s view of American ideology. Another critique of Hartz is that, during the time Foner wrote, it was becoming more fashionable to argue that Locke was not really a strong influence on the founding generation, and that republican virtue was. As Gordon S. Wood claimed in 1987, republicanism, rather than liberalism, was the true ideology of the Enlightenment, brought about as a reaction against the corrupting aspects of commercial society and not as a Lockean endorsement of it.

However, Foner finds agreement with Hartz on the one point that American radical movements have been far more individualistic than European class-based movements, and that therefore, “the persistence of a radical vision resting on small property inhibited the rise of socialist ideologies.” Foner finds it ironic that it was during the time that Hartz’s view was

49 Foner, 62.
51 Foner, 63.
falling out of favor when radical historians began to analyze bourgeois cultural hegemony in the United States, blaming the universal acceptance of “corporate liberalism” by both labor and capital interests.\textsuperscript{52} Foner regards both analyses with skepticism because of their tendency, in his view, to “homogenize” American history.

In some ways, this philosophy reflects the pre-egalitarian and illiberal traditions Rogers Smith refers to. As Gordon Wood points out, before 1776 the dominant ideology had been one that valued virtue’ —a view which would be preserved in southern notions of honor and racial hierarchy, where “Labor or working in order to live was thus traditionally considered to be servile, associated with dependency and a lowly status.”\textsuperscript{53} Further, he argues:

\begin{quote}
Although Locke had argued that labor was the source of property, most conventional thinking did not yet regard labor as a source of wealth. People labored out of necessity, out of poverty, and that necessity and poverty bred the contempt in which laboring people had been held for centuries. Freedom was always valued because it was freedom from this necessity to labor…”Everyone but an idiot,” said the English agricultural writer Arthur …“knows that the lower class must be kept poor or they will never be industrious.”\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Here we see the beginnings of the class structure that would take hold in post-1787 America, regardless of the pleadings that America has no classes. In this arrangement, the worker works only for his means of existence, and this depends on high levels of consumption by rich people. There is a clear hierarchy in this, based on honor, on one’s ability to opt out of work, and on the coercive power of the wealthy as consumers of labor. If our question so heavily depends on the role of labor in American history, these are discouraging beginnings as well.

Yet ideals evident in the United States Constitution reflect the conflicting notions of ‘property’ which came to divide the haves from the have-nots in antebellum America:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Foner, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Wood 38.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Wood, 34.
\end{itemize}
the entire Revolution could be summed up by the radical transformation Americans made in their understanding of property. In classical republican thought…property had been…as part of a person’s identity and a source of his authority…by making landed property merely another “interest” among all the other market interests…Federalists unwittingly stripped property of its older sanctified, static meaning and turned it into a mere material possession or capital commodity.\footnote{Wood, 269-70.}

This controversy over the egalitarian potential for property ownership may be one reason for the difficulty American social movements have had in overturning a regime of property rights many consider to be part of America’s DNA.

**Class Politics in the Industrial Age**

Class-based political coalitions have not, historically, dominated the nation’s electoral politics, and this has inhibited the study of political conflict through class-conflict. America certainly has social classes today, and has always, throughout its entire history, had social classes, because class is not just another categorical grouping but a material dynamic that fundamentally shapes people’s lives. Class-consciousness then, as E.P. Thompson defines it, is “the way in which…experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems…and institutional forms”—and therefore, “class is a relationship, and not a thing.”\footnote{EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 10-11.}

The problem is that this truth has never obtained a clearly-defined place within the political sphere, partly due to the sectional and ethnic divisions that have characterized American politics.

Viewing class as a relationship between people with different roles in an economic system, class-based politics does not necessarily entail that working-class people immediately or overwhelmingly become ideological Marxists. Ira Katznelson invokes Thompson’s warning by reminding us that such a hefty requisite has never been met by any working class in any nation.
Rather, we can only understand class consciousness in the context of workers’ actual conditions—that there is no formula that somehow determines the presence of ‘class’ in a given time or place.\textsuperscript{57} The notion of class-based politics instead implies that the needs, interests, and cultures of working people align in such a way as to constitute a new political coalition based on the interests of the whole working class as defined in opposition to the interests of capital.

One useful demonstration of this is to compare the situation of American workers in the early twentieth century to that of the Labour movement in Britain. George Dangerfield, in his classic \textit{The Strange Death of Liberal England}, characterized the working Englishman as utterly pragmatic:

\begin{quote}
The workers of England…[had] no single desire for solidarity, yet contrived to project a movement which took a revolutionary course…The pre-war English worker was no \textit{doctrinaire}. He could not be expected to respond to impressive theories and visionary speculations. He was conspicuously respectable, law-abiding, even reactionary. And yet…where nine-pence a week meant the difference between acute and normal discomfort, there rose such an assault upon Liberalism.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Eric Hobbsbawm would later observe that this labor unrest went unappreciated by Marxists as the organized and class-conscious mass movement it truly was.\textsuperscript{59} Just as this British labor crisis of 1910, the backdrop of Dangerfield’s study, led to a popular backlash against the dominant liberalism, similar bursts of strike activity in America at the same time often caused supposedly conservative immigrant communities to radicalize and become shockingly militant in fighting for their class interests.\textsuperscript{60}

Compare these economically-based movements of the fearful masses to the particular ideological motives of the American Socialist Party, rendered politically ineffectual by its

\textsuperscript{58} Dangerfield, 215.
\textsuperscript{59} Hobbsbawm, “Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement,” \textit{Marism Today} (June 1968), 171.
determined cling to intellectual purity.\textsuperscript{61} As New Left historian Paul Buhle notes, Marxist ideas were not a major intellectual force in American radical traditions, but they bled through where they were found useful by movements of women, African-Americans, laborers and immigrants.\textsuperscript{62} The U.S. Socialists tried to build their movement primarily on ideology, albeit with a large share of non-working-class members.

In Britain, by contrast, socialist ideology came to be adopted by an existing working-class movement, and had already developed a potential electoral vehicle in the existing Parliamentary Labour Party. Despite the lack of an overt basis in ideology, this formation is consistent with the basis for socialist class struggle: as even Marx had said, trade unions were often the most feasible basis for political organisation dedicated to eventually revolutionary outcomes.\textsuperscript{63} In the British case, the two were eventually married in the 1918 adoption of Clause IV of the party’s constitution, promoting the “common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.”

It is also notable that, despite Hartz’s pronunciations that British conservatism, and therefore socialism, depended more on feudal traditions than their fragmentary American counterparts, feudalism in England had in fact come to an earlier end than in many places in Europe, and if anything, Americans in the revolutionary period were characterized by their radical Englishness.\textsuperscript{64} Despite England’s much earlier feudalism, support for the Conservative Party in the industrial age was based on protection of private wealth from the voting masses. In fact, the Conservative party had hardly held power before the twentieth century, only flourishing

\textsuperscript{61} Foner, 72.
\textsuperscript{62} Buhle, 10.
\textsuperscript{63} “Interview with Karl Marx,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, January 5 1879.
\textsuperscript{64} Wood, 14.
into natural-governing-party status once the socialist rhetoric of Labour Party leaders—and their proximity to power—stirred anxiety among the propertied middle classes. The instinct of these voters was to then abandon the Liberals and embrace the Conservative right wing.65

One common explanation for why there is no socialism in the United States is the sociology of the working class itself.66 The working class, in this analysis, divides itself by types of work (“labor market segmentation”), and by race, ethnicity and gender. However, Foner notes that these kinds of divisions are not unique to America. The British Labour movement, on the other hand, was united and class-based—the economic stress placed on such a large mass of people is, in the first place, what lead to the breakdown and reconstitution of British political coalitions. In fact, at its early stages the Labour party drew electoral support almost equally from the Liberal and Conservative parties, as working class cultures were oftentimes closer to Toryism in areas such as protectionism, the constitution and the franchise.67

This cultural interdependence of old-world traditionalism and socialism may somewhat support Hartz’s position that a society dominated by ideas of liberalism cannot itself sustain a socialist movement. However, it also seems consistent with the view that manifestations of class are often shaped by the shared culture of working people, and even in cultural formations that predated capitalist economic development.68

In explaining the failure of American workers to become the predicted vanguard of the international socialist movement, this may be significant. As Buhle notes, the orthodox position during the nineteenth century was that “Socialists would work to eradicate the constraining remnants of the ancien régime holding back progress”—an idea voiced most loudly by Karl

66 Foner, 68.
Kautsky. But in America there was no ancien regime. In some ways this lack of old-world nobility accelerated the historical force of socialism by giving Americans a far more unified upper class of mostly capitalists, and thus a class formation whose cultural bases aligned more closely with their roles in production.

It is perhaps this aspect of American politics which led Karl Marx to declare in 1872 that North America would be “the workers’ continent par excellence.” On the question of revolutionary insurrection versus parliamentary reform, Marx specifically categorized the United States as one of the exemplary few nations where socialism could be achieved “by peaceful means.” Given this potential, he urged the International to reject abstentionism; it was possible, he believed, for socialist revolution in America to be carried out through the ballot-box.

**Why Was There No Strong Socialist Party?**

The United States also had no electorally competitive labor party committed, at least in theory, to the construction of social democracy. This is a problem that Foner addresses with a number of different explanations. Having looked at explanations focusing on the character of U.S. capitalism and the working class, Foner sees an “alternative” view that focuses on the nature of the political system. Foner highlights the ethnic basis of American politics, and that it was a more salient cause of division in society than class during the early 1900s, when labor parties were developing in Britain and Australia.

Another problem Foner identifies in the “no socialism” question is that it overlooks the presence of socialist political activity during the early twentieth century. During that period, the

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69 Buhle, 22.
71 Ibid.
American Socialist Party grew from 15,000 members in 1903 to 118,000 members in 1912, second in membership size only to the German SPD. Foner argues, “is not simply why socialism is today absent from American politics, but why it once rose and fell.” Foner believes that to answer this question, we must “historicize” the problem, and “examine the key periods when American development diverged most markedly from that of Europe.” Foner compares the American and British socialist movements: “Around 1910, the American Socialist party had elected more officials than its English counterpart; certainly Sombart’s question might as readily have been asked about Britain.”

Another explanation is the early achievement of suffrage—that an American worker thought of himself as a member of a class only while he was at work, but otherwise thought of himself as an equal member of American society. Therefore, a political challenge may have been seen as unnecessary. This explanation may find support in the fact that the countries where political democracy developed earliest are simultaneously those with the weakest social welfare systems. However, as Archer points out, the early suffrage explanation is not entirely correct: some states did in fact attach property restrictions to the vote well into the late nineteenth-century, including restrictions on lower-class whites, and both Northern and Southern state governments often considered introducing them in response to high support for such measures among the middle-classes; resentment of such proposals was often the basis of labor leaders’ rhetorical appeals.

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72 Socialist Party official membership series, (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Historical Society), retrieved through archive.org
73 Foner, 60.
74 Foner, 60.
75 Foner, 68.
76 Esping-Andersen, Three Worlds, 15.
The Internal Explanation: Socialists Miss Their Chance

Recalling Foner’s “internal” explanations, which emphasize the errors made within socialist movements, it is worth considering the divisions that have long plagued the American left. In many ways, the entire history of socialism in the United States is, as well, a history of bitter sectarianism in the United States. Marx and Engels, despite their grand predictions for the American working class, were constantly unnerved by their American comrades’ endless capacity for infighting and ideological rigidity. The result was a workingmen’s movement in the United States whose collapse mirrored that of the First International itself.

The earliest working-class electoral party in North America was the Workingmen’s Party of New York, founded in 1829, and dissolved a year later. Such early efforts were influenced mainly by utopianism, and had little influence on social-democratic movements later on. The modern socialist movement could be said to have originated in communities of German immigrants, such as those in Chicago whose early support and influence on Abraham Lincoln and the Radical Republicans has been documented. Marx himself was a fervent supporter of Lincoln and the Union cause; during Reconstruction, Republican politicians, including Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, sometimes spoke at events sponsored by the International Workingmen’s Association. During the Republicans’ Reconstruction-era decline, Blackburn describes, the party attempted to maintain its faltering support:

 adopting the ideas of radical abolitionists, black as well as white, and with pressure being exerted by a shifting coalition of labor unions, social reformers, African American conventions, feminists, and last but not least, the multiplying American sections of the IWA.

78 Blackburn, 74.
79 Bell, 18.
80 Bell, 17-18.
81 Blackburn, 23.
82 Blackburn, 55.
83 Blackburn, 55.
Accordingly, the IWA’s association with Radical Republicans and its support for the Union effort attained it some level of mainstream respectability in American politics.84

The history of social-democratic and labor parties in the United States could perhaps be traced back to the 1868 merger of a New York-based communist club led by Friedrich Adolf Sorge, and a New York-based society of Lassalleans, forming the Social Party of New York.85 The following year, this organization incorporated as Section 1 of the IWA, and was renamed the General German Labor Association.86 IWA Section 1 was the Marxist segment of the American workingmen’s movement, and future AFL leader Samuel Gompers, who staunchly opposed the Lassalleans for their anti-trade unionism, was among those with strong ties to this section.87

Members of a Fourierist group called New Democracy, which had been founded in 1869, formed Section 12; it came to be dominated by suffragist Victoria Woodhull and a circle of intellectuals. Gompers was one prominent activist who was particularly irritated by their idealism and preaching of free love.88 Lacking a large following, Section 12 later died out without much impact, after its competing delegation to the IWA conference was personally cast out by Karl Marx.

Section 5 of the international was dominated by trade unionist Adolph Strasser, a reformist who in 1874 joined with some Lassalleans to form the Social-Democratic Party of North America, seeking more cooperation with labor unions and non-socialists.89 This was a particularly unhappy marriage, as the Lassalleans were often dogmatically anti-union.90 Following the 1876 collapse of the entire International, the internationalists followed Sorge, and

84 Ibid.
85 Bell, 22.
86 Bell, 22.
87 Forbath, 40.
88 Ibid.
89 Bell, 23.
90 Ibid.
the Lassalleans followed Strasser, to reunite as the Workingmen’s Party, which one year later was renamed the Socialist Labor Party. In 1880, the party split as a group of anarchists left to form an independent organization following Mikhail Bakunin, but the Socialist Labor Party strode onward as it gradually lost most of its following.

In 1890, Columbia law professor Daniel DeLeon, a Knights of Labor organizer, joined the empty shell of the Socialist Labor Party. DeLeon’s commitment to Marxist theory was absolute, and within one year of joining he was, according to Bell, the party’s “undisputed leader and master.” DeLeon had no tolerance for reform or revision, and believed in simultaneous political and economic revolution; he led the party to scrap all policy demands and platform planks, dismissing them, and those of the Social Democrats, as mere “palliatives.” His grand strategy was to soften the AFL’s opposition to socialism by infiltrating the organization, and to completely capture the dying Knights of Labor. By this time, Friedrich Engels had grown tired of the constant antics of the Socialist Labor Party. He wrote to Sorge in 1891, “it proves how useless is a platform—for the most part theoretically correct—if it is unable to get into contact with the actual needs of the people.”

In 1897, some sections of the Socialist Labor Party would join with the American Railway Union (ARU) and the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth, an agrarian group which lived on a commune in Washington state. This was done at the urging of ARU co-founder Eugene Debs, a former Indiana state senator who had been converted to socialism by

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91 Bell, 24.
92 Bell, 25.
93 Bell, 32.
94 Bell, 53-4.
95 Bell, 33-35.
96 Bell, 32.
97 Bell, 36.
reading Karl Kautsky while jailed for participation in the Pullman Strike.\footnote{Bell, 50.} These groups, the ARU at the forefront, formed a new umbrella organization: the Social Democracy of America. It disintegrated within one year. Debs and a group of dissenters split and formed their own Social Democratic Party of America, declaring it a “class-conscious, revolutionary social organization.”\footnote{Bell, 53.} In 1901, a segment of Socialist Labor Party members, dissatisfied with DeLeon’s dictatorial style and uncompromising stances, joined Debs and his followers to form the Socialist Party of America, the familiar home to Debs’s, and later Norman Thomas’s, presidential campaigns.\footnote{Ibid.}

From 1900-1919, the Socialist Party was a serious electoral organization, but neglected non-electoral actions such as strikes, and failed to absorb immigrant groups. Failing to work with the IWW, the Socialist party settled for a largely middle-class following, and was memorably mocked by Trotsky as “a party of dentists.”\footnote{Foner, 71.} Opposition to the First World War also opened the Socialist Party up to government repression. Foner argues that by supporting the war, the Socialist Party could have gained greater legitimacy, as Labour and the SPD had attempted. However, this would have come at the cost of abandoning its anti-imperialist stance. After the Russian Revolution, a Comintern-influenced faction introduced heated ideological sectarianism into the Socialist Party, effectively destroying it.

One criticism Foner levels, despite the bourgeois reputation of the Socialist Party, is that in contrast to its European counterparts, “the American was the party that remained most true to socialist principles,” and that this prevented it from becoming a serious electoral vehicle for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Bell, 50.}
\item \textit{Bell, 53.}
\item \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textit{Foner, 71.}
\end{itemize}
working-class politics. However, the accuracy of this criticism is questionable, and Foner may be overestimating the electoral dangers of ideological consistency. Social democrats generally succeeded in gaining power in European countries where industrialization occurred rapidly, regardless of their willingness to moderate. Workers were likewise drawn into left parties whose pragmatism in office contrasted with their radically Marxist electoral platforms. In Norway, the Labor Party’s support grew even as it joined the Comintern between 1919 and 1923, and the Swedish Social Democrats often governed alone with Communist parliamentary support, promoting an overtly Marxist program until after the Second World War.

However, the Socialist Party of America did perhaps fail to recognize the value of farmers and agrarian populism to building a social-democratic electoral coalition. Indeed, the social democrats of Europe often formed governments with the support of middle class and progressive agrarian parties—not necessarily consistent with the proletarian basis of Marxian class struggle, but often essential to the success of socialism in parliamentary government. There is precedent to suggest that socialist parties have often found a winning formula in such an arrangement: Esping-Andersen, in his study of Scandinavian social democracy, notes that this was the most stable coalition for social-democratic political power. In his view, “The historical crossroads came with a political realignment that coalesced farmers and working class, transforming ‘class parties’ into ‘people’s parties’.” This arrangement, he points out, is what

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102 Foner, 72.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
“established the parameters of postwar welfare state politics,” not to mention the lasting dominance of social democracy in postwar Europe.  

This view is illustrated by one thus-far overlooked form of American socialism: the early-twentieth-century rise of agrarian socialism and farmer-laborism in western states. In particular, the Non-Partisan League (NPL) of North Dakota achieved what is perhaps the most political power of any socialist movement in United States history. Not only was it possible for these fringe farming interests to play a part in socialist organizing—it may have been the most promising avenue for socialist politics in the United States. Lipset cites one 1911 study which showed where Socialist Party support was strongest: not in the proletarian strongholds of New York City or Chicago, but in the wheat-growing regions of Oklahoma. Socialist Party organizer A.C. Townley likewise recruited hundreds of North Dakota farmers to the party, but was ordered to desist by national party leaders.

As Lipset proposes, “If the Party had not been destroyed by [World War I], the wheat farmers of Oklahoma or North Dakota might have taken the lead in establishing a strong socialist movement on this continent.” This is not a far-fetched conclusion, given that the Saskatchewan Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) went on to create a provincial health program that would become the basis of Canada’s Medicare system, and that its current incarnation, the labor-based New Democratic Party, has formed provincial governments and at times held the balance of power in the federal parliament.

In the case of North Dakota, Townley and his supporters split from the Socialist Party to form the Non-Partisan League—an electoral association that ran candidates in Republican
primaries; as a result, the NPL elected a socialist governor in 1916, and in 1918 won an outright majority in both legislative houses, putting North Dakota under a full NPL government. The result: “a state bank; a Home Building Association to lend money at low rates of interest; a graduated state income tax distinguishing between earned and unearned income; a state hail-insurance fund; a workmen’s compensation act.”  These successes captured the attention of Socialist leaders at the national level, who now saw that “the agrarian [NPL] was carrying out the socialist program.”

Given the heterogeneous class makeup of the Socialist Party, it is puzzling why they did not consider this a possible basis for an electoral coalition when they had the chance. As Lipset would observe in his sociological field study in Saskatchewan, the farmers had no lack of class-consciousness:

> The farmers are interested in their society and its relations to the rest of the world…There are informal gatherings…in which farmers discuss economic and political problems…they consider the ideas of Adam Smith, Karl Marx… [James] Keir Hardie, William Jennings Bryan, Thorstein Veblen, and others.

The potential for class-consciousness among rural populations appears, in this case, to be a missed opportunity for the American left to build a Nordic-style, social-democratic electoral coalition. This could perhaps have circumvented the left’s later need to accommodate the demands of Southern Democrats, whose hostility to labor would so profoundly limit the social-democratic potential of the New Deal. The momentary success of the NPL on the plains seems to somewhat validate the “internal” explanations expressed in Foner’s writing—that the failure of socialism in the United States partly a failure of socialists to organize an enduring coalition.

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113 Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism*, xv.
Instead, the Socialist Party continued its decline, and in the 1930s instantly erased itself from political relevance by refusing to support the New Deal agenda.\footnote{Bell, ix.} By contrast, Foner notes that the Communists during this time “saw themselves as…the left wing of the New Deal coalition.”\footnote{Foner, 72.} According to Bell, the Socialists attempted to maintain an ideological purity, or paranoia, which called on them to stand against a coming fascist takeover of the United States.\footnote{Bell, ix.} When fascism in Europe prompted other groups, such as the Communist Party, to form a Popular Front, the Socialists’ commitment to the effort was tepid at best.\footnote{Bell, 9.}

By the 1930s, the Communist Party had established itself as the major socialist party in the United States. Foner believes the Communists achieved an impressive record.\footnote{Foner, 72.} They understood the need to organize beyond elections, and were active in the labor movement, the civil rights movement, and the Popular Front against fascism in Spain.\footnote{Ibid.} However, President Roosevelt eventually managed to absorb labor militancy into the Democratic Party, and during the war the Communists committed to a no-strike pledge, alienating their supporters without gaining further legitimacy with those in power.

Unfortunately for the Communist Party, one main source of legitimacy was the USSR, which came to be its greatest liability. The Communists had found success only when they appealed to American nationalism, as during the war effort in the 1940s. These vulnerabilities finished off the party by the onset of the Cold War.
The External Explanation: American Institutions and the Two-Party System Dominate

The American system of political institutions is also a potent explanation for the lack of a socialist party, and the difficulty of social-democratic change. Foner notes the challenge of what he calls “the unusual structure of American politics.” In this he includes the size and regional diversity of the U.S., a two-party system entrenched by the Electoral College system, and the ability of the two main parties to absorb and defang social movements.

Because a society’s institutions shape the activity of political movements to a large extent, it is worth examining the structures which would discourage an independent socialist party or a politically active labor movement from becoming an independent political force. A question worth attempting to answer is that posed by Lipset and Rokkan, concerning the “sequence of thresholds” which determine the success or failure of social movements in the political sphere:

we must know about the possibilities, the implications, and the limitations of majority rule in the system: What alliances would be most likely to bring about majority control of the organs of representation and how much influence could such majorities in fact exert on the basic structuring of the institutions and the allocations within the system.

In their analysis, the U.S. political system is of the most restrictive type, with high-threshold majority representation and separation of powers, which they believe has often encouraged labor movements not to move past a “Lib-Lab” coalition with “the more reformist of the established parties”—in the U.S. and in other nations with similarly limited opportunities for independent political representation. In Lipset’s view the labor-liberal segment of the Democratic Party

120 Foner, 69.
121 Ibid.
123 Lipset and Rokkan, 31
meets the standard for being a social-democratic coalition, assuming that the constitutional structure of the United States naturally enforces a system limited to two ideologically mixed, relatively centrist parties.\footnote{124} However, one may also point out that the British Labour party broke through the original “Lib-Lab” formation to replace the Liberals as the main opposition to the Conservatives, and eventually form majority governments.

The rigid structure of the federal government, and of federalism itself, encourage the most rigid two-party system that has led the Democratic Party to absorb the social-democratic agenda of the labor movement, and encouraged alliances with its right-wing factions as well as with the Republican opposition. Lipset lays the most blame upon the Electoral College system, which sets a threshold of an absolute majority of electors, rather than a plurality:

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).\footnote{125}

It is not so much the electoral system used, but the checks, balances and redundancies of a political system that may be the most toxic to a left-labor project.

The flexibility of American political coalitions is surely evident in the intra-party politics of the Democrats in the New Deal era, with major tensions between the party’s more pro-labor northern wing and its anti-labor southern wing. It was also a problem that a significant segment of the working class was composed of southern blacks, whose voting rights were heavily restricted. This had the effect of shrinking the working-class vote as a share of the electorate, entrenching a core group of southern “reactionaries” within the Democratic congressional

\footnote{124} Ibid.\footnote{125} Lipset, “Marx, Engels, and America’s Political Parties,” The Wilson Quarterly 2 (1), 1978, 94.
caucus.\textsuperscript{126} As Katznelson, Geiger and Kryder have pointed out, the anti-labor hostility of these southern Democrats in Congress is precisely what prevented the party linkage with labor unions from becoming the basis of a postwar social-democratic project.\textsuperscript{127} This is especially important because the Democrats were long the most viable electoral option for such a project, and the U.S. political system made it especially hard to start a separate labor party like those of Britain and Australia.

Outright repression of political movements, on behalf of the existing two major parties, is another cause that may have stunted a labor party. Foner notes that the Populists lost in the 1890s because of “blatant fraud,” as well as anti-union violence by federal, state, and private troops, and repression that was “unparalleled in Europe.”\textsuperscript{128} Court rulings were used to defeat strikes, and as Bell points out, between the end of Reconstruction and the early 1880s Pinkerton troops came to outnumber United States army soldiers, who were often used to break strikes as well.\textsuperscript{129} In addition, Socialist Party and IWW leaders were imprisoned and deported during the first Red Scare, crippling these organizations. The second Red Scare of the 1950s, Foner adds, “effectively destroyed the Communist Party.”\textsuperscript{130}

Foner is skeptical of this explanation, however, because radicals in Europe also faced repression, and even execution—a fate which American labor leaders generally avoided. The republican traditions of American politics meant that American radicals “lacked the tradition of underground organization that might have enabled them to survive repressive governments,” as would have been necessary in Europe.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{126} Foner, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Foner, 68.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Blackburn 82.
\item \textsuperscript{130} Foner, 68.
\item \textsuperscript{131} Foner, 70.
\end{itemize}
As demonstrated, class has often been a weak cleavage in the American politics and the American party system. Lipset argues that the early achievement of universal male suffrage hindered socialist organizing, not because it lessened the perceived need for class struggle, but because the professional politicians of the Democratic Party was established so early in American history. Democratic professionals had spent years building “a mass-based party relying on town and ward organizations that appealed at least as much to ethnocultural issues as to economic concerns.”  

Illiberal aspects of early Democratic-party ideology, such as those appeals to “ethnocultural issues,” trumped appeals to class and prevented a unified class-based party.

When the time came that an independent socialist party would have formed, Lipset argues, “social democrats had to compete for the allegiance of workers who had already developed party-political loyalties in an established party system.” With suffrage already attained, the gradually developing working class communities were absorbed into the existing party structures before they had enough density to support an independent political project.

Buhle argues that the “volatile conditions” of the American working class assured that there would be great difficulty establishing a “continuity” of Marxist ideas in a particular movement; as well, the political force of organized capital ensured that radical activity would be only “a sporadic threat to the home system,” occurring in “outbursts,” and then disappearing. This seems an apt characterization of socialist movements in the United States, which have obtained momentary successes, but never gained traction as a class-based political coalition in

133 Lipset, It Didn’t Happen Here, 59.
134 Buhle, 15.
American politics. One could argue that this is an effect of the long-standing legal conventions and institutional structures of the American state, especially regarding their role in constraining popular movements.

However, what is not likely a major factor in explaining the lack of an independent working-class party is the use of single-member plurality elections as opposed to proportional representation. Although Duverger’s law can often pose a challenge to third parties trying to reach office, Robin Archer points out that social democrats were competitive throughout Europe well before the adoption of PR: “Far from helping to cause the rise of labor-based parties, proportional representation was typically introduced by their opponents as a response to their rise,” and adopted to guard against the impending threat of a socialist majority government.135

Further, he argues, a working-class-based party is particularly likely to elect candidates under a first-past-the-post system, because of the geographic concentration of its potential working-class supporters, and the possibility of electing candidates on just over one-third of the vote (if in a three-party system).136 Likewise, American working-class voters would generally be concentrated in highly industrialized areas; mid-western cities in particular had highly competitive elections between the two parties, whose support was based more on ethnicity than class, and would thus be equally impacted by a class-based third party.137

**The Weakness of the State Limits the Possibilities of Reform**

Robert Dahl, in his simply-titled work *How Democratic is the American Constitution*, outlines the various aspects of Americans constitution which, compared to those of the twenty-two countries where democratic institutions have functioned continuously since 1950, are of a

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136 Archer, 79.
137 Archer, 79.
notably undemocratic character. In particular, he points to federalism, strong bicameralism, and unequal representation at the national level, finding the United States to be an outlier. In a significant way, Dahl describes the American system as being highly outdated compared with similar nations:

Some privileged members of Parliament, like Edmund Burke, referred to “virtual representation,” where the aristocratic minority represented the best interests of the entire country. But the bulk of the people who were excluded easily saw through that convenient fiction, and as soon as they were able to they rejected these pretensions and gained the right to vote.  

It is the endurance of such pretensions in United States politics which have likewise prevented popular movements in the United States from exerting much sustained influence.

This is as true for moments of progressive reform as it is for radical movements. It has been shown that a high number of veto-players in a governmental structure increases the difficulty of passing social welfare legislation, compared with parliamentary systems with one single veto player (the majority in parliament). Thus, even in the face of overwhelming public sentiment, policy outcomes generally default to those favored by the wealthy if those policies were already the status-quo. Majoritarian voter preferences have, conversely, been found to have little or no relationship to government policy. 

As political scientist Martin Gilens has demonstrated, legislation is 30% more likely to be passed if favored by wealthy Americans. In the American system, the influence of special interests is amplified by the greater number of competing interests and longer legislative timeline, creating a system that is remarkably insulated from public opinion.

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139 Alfred Stepan and Juan Linz, “Comparative Perspectives on Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in the United States,” Perspectives on Politics 9 (4), December 2011, 846.
140 Gilens, 786.
141 Gilens, 789.
143 Ibid.
helps to explain Gilens’s finding that when the preferences of middle class and wealthy voters diverge, “government policy appears to be fairly responsive to the well-off and virtually unrelated to the desires of low- and middle-income citizens.”\(^{144}\) According to Gilens, our system of checks and balances results in a “status-quo bias” where, even when faced with overwhelming public sentiment, policy outcomes generally default to those favored by the wealthy—especially if those policies are already in place.\(^{145}\)

There are some partisan differences involved in the process, but they are often overstated. While, predictably, Republican senators have been found to be very responsive to the preferences of the wealthy, both Democratic and Republican legislators are about equally unresponsive to the preferences of lower-income groups.\(^ {146}\) In most developed countries the participation of social-democratic parties in government tends to correlate with higher levels of social expenditure and trade union membership, however, for reasons explained, the United States has not historically had one.\(^ \text{147}\)

One of the major controversies of the founding era, although forgotten today, was the size of electoral districts, and in relation, the powers of a federal state. As Holton observes, the preference which dominated the 1787 convention was for a highly unresponsive, but also highly powerful, federal government:

Almost without exception, the admirers of large polities and districts wanted the states to crack down on delinquent debtors and taxpayers, whereas Americans who wished to shrink the sphere of government or maintain its current size were advocates for debt and tax relief.\(^{148}\)

\(^{144}\) Gilens, 789.
\(^{145}\) Gilens, 786.
The most prominent populists and democrats at the time were, in contrast, largely anti-statist, and feared the federal state as a tool of wealthy elites. Although this attitude is not necessarily the same today, it is an origin whose influence would later be felt in the relative strength of anarchism on the American left compared to the European left, and the suspicion of the potential unintended consequences of nationalization that gripped labor leaders in the late nineteenth century.

James Madison explains in *Federalist No. 10*, that the goal of checks and balances is to restrain the power of “faction,” mainly in order to protect property rights, and American institutions have an accordingly anti-majoritarian tilt.149 These structures, incorporated into America’s federal design, are a far greater burden on majoritarian legislation than those of Britain, for example, where the modern constitution has made it far more feasible to advance a socialist project legislatively—as Labour government minister Aneurin Bevan would declare, “The function of parliamentary democracy, under universal franchise…is to expose wealth-privilege to the attack of the people…a sword pointed at the heart of property-power.”150

It is true that the American constitution was framed within a culture where “virtuous officeholders” were considered to be those who would side with propertied interests, whereas the phrase “improper election” referred to representatives who would side with the popular majority will, in response to two decades of democratic experimentation following 1776.151 Thomas Jefferson, concerned over the “misery” that excessive inequalities of wealth could impose on the propertyless majority, cautioned Madison against taking too hard of a line on protecting property

149 James Madison, *Federalist 10.*
151 Holton, 188-190.
rights in the federal constitution, arguing that the results could be wasteful and counterproductive, even in Locke’s terms:

> Whenever there is in any country, uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right. The earth is given as a common stock for man to labour and live on. If, for the encouragement of industry we allow it to be appropriated, we must take care that other employment be furnished to those excluded from the appropriation.\textsuperscript{152}

This is not to fall into a functionalist trap of applying today’s conditions to the motives of men long dead. Although liberalism was a major influence on the men who designed America’s institutions, Madison and his contemporaries likely did not intend to imprison succeeding generations under a system of their design.

The framers of the federal constitution were often working off what they knew, and devised a system of with striking structural similarities to the British model: a single executive officer with veto power, two legislative houses representing separate constituencies, and the need for all three to agree on new laws.\textsuperscript{153} The framers may, however, have inadvertently saddled the United States with a system that is excessively anti-majoritarian, by failing to anticipate that further republican experimentation would be impeded by a greatly expanded union of states.

Amending the constitution, and therefore the structure and powers of the state, requires cooperation among three-fourths of states—therefore, an increasing number of states increases the difficulty of amendment. Today, for example, this places a requirement of 75 to 76 separate votes to be held in favor, by 75 to 76 separate legislative chambers—a magnitude likely unimaginable to the framers of the constitution in 1789. However, the effect is that the powers of the federal government could not later be changed, nor its institutions democratized, without great difficulty.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[153] Bouton, 69.
\end{footnotes}
Lipset has, similarly, categorized federalism itself as a “double-edged sword,” because it has simultaneously “weakened the state as an instrument of reform” at the federal level, yet has conversely “also allowed socialists the possibility of electoral success and executive control in political units much smaller than the country as a whole.”

Therefore, some of the very same factors which made socialism so difficult to represent on a national scale have also allowed it small spaces in which to flourish—for example, Milwaukee’s “sewer socialism” of the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Of course, the problem here is that most socialist movements would not be satisfied to abandon large segments of working America by writing off large portions of the country deemed too conservative—the need for a national social-democratic project demands more answers than this.

American political scientist Theodore Lowi has argued that left movements may now have a structural economic advantage that did not exist under the disjointed federal system of a hundred years ago. One major change since the progressive era is the emergence of the federal government as the main source of redistributive social welfare policies, rather than the states. Now that the United States economy has a far more national political and economic structure, he argues, it would be easier for a social-democratic political movement to gain power.

Federalism poses an additional economic impediment to labor organization on a national scale. Although the centralization of labor organizations tends to make their bargaining position

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154 Lipset, It Didn’t Happen Here, 83.
156 Lowi, 379.
more powerful, and thus increase labor’s influence in national economies, the federal structure of
the United States requires organizational fragmentation and more decentralized bargaining
strategies.\textsuperscript{157} This is a problem for America’s social-democratic potential, since the
uncoordinated, decentralized system of firm-level collective bargaining increases
macroeconomic spillover effects while simultaneously restraining the real wages of all workers,
including those who are unionized.\textsuperscript{158} Traditionally, the corporatist model assumes that labor is
likely to gain a greater share of the national income over capital if workers are united, while
under a regime of decentralized bargaining they are often at cross-purposes.\textsuperscript{159}

\textbf{Labor Unions Take an Anti-Statist Approach During the Progressive Era}

The difficulty of national political organizing, and the weakness of the federal state as a
tool of reform, both figure into a common perception that the American labor movement has
simply been more conservative than its European counterparts, resulting in weaker working-class
political organization. Daniel Bell charged in 1959 that, “if socialism as an historically organized
movement has not achieved a permanency in American life, it is largely due to the role of the
American Federation of Labor.”\textsuperscript{160}

Rodgers provides context for this moment of working-class history in the developed world:

in 1900 the nations of the North Atlantic economy were just working their way back to
prosperity from the hard times of the mid-1890s. Still more fragile was…the “social
peace” between the newly massed forces of labor and capital. On both sides of the
Atlantic—from the wave of strikes in France between 1880 and 1883 to the meteoric rise

\textsuperscript{158} Ahlquist, 172.
\textsuperscript{160} Bell, 36.
of the Knights of Labor in the United States in 1885 and 1886…the 1880s had launched a
cycle of worker-employer strife whose ultimate destination no one could predict.\footnote{Daniel T. Rodgers, \textit{Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age}, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998), 10.}

However, labor ultimately settled on a different tactical approach which vastly differed from that
of their European brothers and sisters. Foner asks, “Why, despite a history of labor violence
unparalleled in Europe, does organized labor in the United States appear so much more
conservative and apolitical than its European counterparts?”\footnote{Foner, 68.} Instead Foner focuses on the
reasons why industrial class consciousness never translated into a political or partisan force in
America— “the \textit{disjuncture} of industrial relations and political practice.”\footnote{Ibid.} Indeed, the
American trade union movement as far back as the nineteenth century adopted a conciliatory
position towards the political dominance of the Democratic and Republican parties, a pattern that

However, despite this perceived disjuncture, the U.S. trade union movement has also been
deficient in its lack of a strong ideology of industrial democracy, which Foner does not seem to
confront. This allows for a better explanation of the social-democratic deficiency of American
politics, in contrast to Foner’s historically-based theoretical explanation. Lipset’s question is
somewhat different from Foner’s: “Why does labor representation take on an explicitly \textit{class}
form in northern Europe and a populist, \textit{multiclass} form in the United States?”\footnote{Lipset, “Marx, Engels…,” 103.} Both Lipset’s
inquiry and Foner’s are of value in explaining why, or if, the United States remains such an
anomaly.
A common explanation is that of the American labor movement’s conservative plain-and-simple unionism. This view holds that, the AFL was mainly composed of craft unions, and was correspondingly conservative in its politics; by contrast, the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) has been predominantly industrial throughout its existence, and cooperated with Liberal and Labour reform projects.166 Far from their role in expanding the welfare state in the New Deal era, this period saw American labor maintain a libertarian opposition to elitist proposals for minimum wage laws, eight-hour laws, health insurance, and unemployment insurance; the AFL claimed that workers would become dependent on the government for services the union should provide on a voluntary basis.167 Social insurance was instead fought for by progressive social scientists, and the AFL held a stridently anti-welfare stance throughout the Progressive era.168

Forbath accepts the conventional view to some extent:

Elsewhere, in the decades around the turn of the century, labor’s national organizations embraced broad, class-based programs of reform and redistribution, but the American Federation of Labor spurned them, with the lasting effects that countless scholars have chronicled.169

However, he finds, there are reasons American labor took this route which run counter to notions of labor’s conservatism. He points out the exceptional position of judicial review in the American legal system, although it had presented an obstacle, to a lesser extent, in France as well.170

The conservatism of the AFL’s political approach is often contrasted with that of the earlier Knights of Labor, which had thoroughly established itself as a political force, forming labor

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166 Skocpol, 218.
167 Skocpol 208-211.
168 Skocpol, 206.
169 Forbath, 1.
170 Rodgers, 227.
parties in all but one of the states, and electing its own candidates to city and state office. The Knights’ radical republican ideals led them to promote an aggressive legislative agenda: “hours laws and other workplace regulations, the abolition of private banking, public funding for worker-owned industry, and the nationalization of monopolies.”

However, the contrast of a radical Knights of Labor with a conservative AFL does not sufficiently account for the different historical contexts within which each organization dominated. The Knights had existed for over a decade when the AFL was established during the early 1880s, and in these early days most AFL activists were as radical in outlook as were the Knights:

In a plebiscite vote in 1894, a majority of the AFL’s constituent unions endorsed a socialist platform that called for “independent labor politics” and an eleven-point legislative program including not only workplace regulation and a universal eight-hour day but also cooperative, municipal, or national ownership of industry.

The AFL’s increasing conservatism after 1890, Forbath argues, is due to the new difficulties posed by new developments in American jurisprudence.

The courts played a powerful role in shaping labor’s relationship to the American political system:

During the decades bracketing the turn of the century, courts extracted from labor many key strategic and ideological accommodations, changing trade unionists’ views of what was possible and desirable in politics and industry.

Courts outlawed boycotts and sympathy strikes, under the threat of harsh sanctions. This made legislative advocacy less effective, because legislation that was won could always be struck down, and sanctions against large-scale union organizations made decentralized organization of
strikes on a local level essential.\textsuperscript{175} Of these tools, strikes and agitation were seen as the more effective; as Samuel Gompers declared, “Thus we accomplished through economic power what we had failed to achieve through legislation.”\textsuperscript{176} The need to lessen the role of the state in worker’s lives, because of this toxic role of the courts, led the American labor movement to favor anti-statist voluntarism over government social provision.\textsuperscript{177}

In Forbath’s view, this was the seed of the AFL’s more libertarian outlook, in contrast to its European counterparts over the first half of the twentieth century. This would further lessen labor’s influence within the New Deal coalition, already constrained by southern Democrats; the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 was adopted partly by labor’s weakened position during an era of high unemployment: according to Rodgers, “union coalitions that had long resisted government adjudication of the terms of collective bargaining turned to the state to broker new pacts between labor, government, and stability-seeking employers.”\textsuperscript{178} The Roosevelt Administration’s original 1937 minimum wage proposal “founcred on the opposition of employers (who had no interest in opening their account books to the public), southern economic interests (jealous of their low-wage regional advantage), and the AFL (still confident of the “manlier” course of strikes and bargaining).

\textbf{Sectionalism Limits the New Deal Coalition}

Recalling Foner’s perspective that industrial relations lacked a political character, even when socialist organizations were involved, the unique character of America’s party coalitions
may be responsible for the lack of a more strongly political labor movement. According to Bensel, in both the North and the South, in conflicts based on class and wealth distribution, Republicans tend[ed] to represent capital and the Democrats, labor. However, because interregional redistribution was the dominant force shaping the political system, most of the energy generated by contests over intraregional income shares could not find an outlet in party competition and spun off into largely nonpartisan, apolitical, strike activity.  

Thus the sectional divisions characterizing America’s political-economic development contributed to defining the industrial, but non-political, character of organized labor in the United States prior to the Second World War.

A major weakness of the Hartz thesis is in his concept of sectionalism within the post-colonial “fragments.” The conflict between north and south has had lasting effects on the national political economy. In Philip Wood’s characterization:

the characteristics of southern development in the twentieth century—widespread black and white poverty, low-wage, labor-intensive production, and retarded social and infrastructural development—are results of the continued domination of an essentially precapitalist planter ruling class.  

This would be a problem for Hartz, since a wide section of the country is not fully integrated into the supposedly uniform liberal capitalist economy.

Hartz sorts the sections of America into “feudal” and “Enlightenment fragments,” explaining that liberalism dominates because elitist, old-world Whiggery had no soil in which to take hold. However, he falls into the trap of analyzing antebellum America as a nation-state that can be categorized on the lines of a single intellectual tradition. Having identified the ideological hegemony of classical liberalism in the United States, Hartz dismisses what he calls “imperfections” in the otherwise liberal consensus, “as when feudal remnants cling to the

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“American fragment,” referring to the South and its plantation aristocracy.\textsuperscript{181} Hartz pays this little mind, as it is in his view a complication rather than an existentially significant feature of American political economy.

However, as Richard Bensel argues in his work \textit{Yankee Leviathan}, this is not nearly the case. Rather than envision America as a fragment of British empire, Bensel proposes that the Civil War represents “the true foundational moment in American political development,” more so than the initial separation from Britain.\textsuperscript{182} This is an important development in American political economy because it helps explain the lack of class-based political partisanship in American history.

This lack of class-based politics can be likewise connected to the lack of a fully social-democratic settlement in the post-World War II era. As Bensel notes, “What united New Dealers between 1932 and 1965 was not a social-democratic vision but a common assault on the privileges of northern capital.”\textsuperscript{183} Therefore, sectional differences were long a central feature of American state-building, enduring even into the New Deal era and onward.

The backdrop of this strange path of development was the rise of the Republican Party, the building of the Civil War and Reconstruction governments, and the subsequent fall of the Republican coalition. In his telling, the high expense of maintaining an extended federal occupation of the South, as well as divisions between the northern and southern sections of the Republican Party, caused the breakup of the Republican Party’s monolithic status and integration with the American state itself. This allowed Reconstruction to fall by the wayside, and white vigilantes rushed to fill the public life of the Southern states, and Democrats, their capitols.\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{181} Hartz, Founding, 5.
\textsuperscript{182} Bensel, 10.
\textsuperscript{183} Bensel, 433.
\textsuperscript{184} Blackburn, 68.
One lasting structural effect of the Civil War era is one that Bensel refers to as a “cross-sectional inversion of class alignments” within the two-party system. By the early twentieth century the Republican coalition consisted of northern industrialists and poor southern blacks, while the Democratic coalition combined the southern plantation elites with the northern industrial proletariat. Therefore, Bensel points out, political action against upper-class privilege would always conflict with the “elite interests” strongly represented in both major parties.

The lack of class-based partisanship did not just impede the political efforts of working-class organizations: it changed their ideological character and tactics. As David Montgomery notes, the entrenched two-party system actually led much of the labor movement, especially the AFL, to reject the policies of nationalization and public ownership of industry that were so dear to their European counterparts. Instead, the Americans feared that the U.S. government was so firmly controlled by the elite constituents of both Democratic and Republican parties that public ownership would only further cement capitalist exploitation, under the control of the state. Given the importance of nationalization to the construction of a social-democratic consensus in Europe, this was a serious inhibition for the development of a socialist ideology within the U.S. labor movement. This would also make it nearly impossible to form a partisan political force on behalf of working-class voters within one of the two major parties.

The major innovation of the New Deal coalition of the 1930s-60s was its ability to transcend this divide, but with significant ideological restrictions on the resulting brand of American social liberalism. Just as tensions within the dominant Republican Party in the 1870s led to the fall of the post-Civil War governing order, so did tensions within the dominant Democratic party in the post-World War II era limit the prospects for social and economic

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185 Bensel, 421.
186 Bensel, 421.
change along social-democratic lines. It was this “cross-sectional inversion of class
alignments,” as Bensel notes, which may also explain the phenomenon of southern Democrats
in the New Deal coalition, and by proxy, the idiosyncratic development of American liberalism
as an ideology, compared with European social democracy.

This limitation may be partly the product of a southern sense of impropriety that workers
would attempt to rise above their place in the hierarchy. However, examination of the sectional
aspects of the New Deal coalition reveals a consensus based more on political convenience than
ideological consistency. As Katznelson, Geiger and Kryder indicate in their study, “Limiting
Liberalism: The Southern Veto in Congress, 1933-1950,” paint a picture whereby modern
American liberalism developed as a sort of lowest common denominator for a Democratic party
constrained by its Southern membership. This was an attempt to build a national coalition among
sectional opponents within one of the two major parties. This intraparty coalition, they argue,
“defined the landscape and moral geography of postwar American liberalism,” and the need to
maintain this coalition placed limits on the ideology itself.189

One of the long-standing anxieties of the Southern plantation elite had been its favor of
southern economic insularity and resistance of a nationalized labor market; as Bensel notes, these
plantation interests dominated the southern section of the Democratic party organization.190 This
would remain the case through the next century when, as Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder note,
New Deal labor reforms were seen as threatening the insularity of the southern labor market.
This integration was especially threatening to the southern economic elites who held power in
the Democratic Party.191 Consistent with Bensel’s observation of the sectional basis for partisan

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188 Bensel, 421.
189 Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder, 302.
190 Bensel, 425.
191 Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder, 299.
conflict, southern Democrats’ opposition to big business was part of their “heritage” of opposing northern industrial interests that controlled the Republican Party.

In their observation, the power of southern Democrats in Congress threatened to derail the New Deal coalition, but also contained possibility:

The Democratic party’s landslide victories in 1932, 1934, and 1936 converted it from a regional to a genuinely national force and remade it into an instrument of governance…an agrarian-industrial alliance that could effectively challenge the prerogatives of capital became a possibility.¹⁹²

This same type of alliance would be critical to the success of social-democratic political movements in Europe, albeit in a quite different form. As the three co-authors note, the southerners within this alliance supported the economic intervention and social welfare policies, and nearly all New Deal measures except for those that were pro-labor.¹⁹³

This perspective may offer a more rigorous explanation for why the New Deal consensus developed as such a poor substitute for an American social democracy. Rather than leading to greater worker participation in the management of industrial institutions, Lichtenstein and Harris write that labor was saddled with the conservative interpretation of labor law long favored by the National Labor Relations Board:

industrial democracy meant just one thing: collective bargaining…Other components of the early New Deal version of an industrial democracy, such as national planning, industry councils, or a more direct and robust shop-floor unionism, were eliminated…In the American context—that is, where the state played but a relatively tepid role in providing legal and economic encouragement for mass unionization—such a system of essentially voluntary collective bargaining was bound to erode.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder, 284.
¹⁹³ Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder, 293.
These limitations translated into the passive role of labor in the postwar settlement, and the weakness of labor within the foundations of American liberalism.

**The New Deal Transforms Social Politics**

Despite the limits on labor reforms, the New Deal does truly represent a period when American social policy made strides that outpaced those of any nation in Europe. It was a common criticism at the time, as it is now, that the New Deal was a haphazard collection of unrelated experiments and reforms. But these claims live on in competition with opposing and contradictory ones. As Daniel T. Rodgers outlines:

> The New Deal was a triumph for labor; it was capitalism’s ambulance wagon. It was a moment of extraordinary public compassion for the poor and the unemployed; it was shaped by the class and racial prejudices of the white southerners who still dominated the Democratic Party…It constitutes the defining moment of twentieth-century American progressive politics. But its logic still eludes us.\(^{195}\)

However, Rodgers himself holds the position that, whatever the New Deal’s limitations were, “In a land filled with the wreckage of so many earlier social policy designs, the surge of policy energy and initiative in the New Deal remains little short of extraordinary.”\(^{196}\)

> From the Roaring Twenties, through the crash, into the Great Depression, the United States economy fell hard, into a dire position worse than that of most European economies. However, Rodgers notes, while Labour had been in power during the early years of the Depression, in the United States the New Deal intellectual framework was a response not to the severity of economic conditions, but to the discredited recovery responses of the Republicans. As he notes, the logic of never letting a crisis go to waste is backward: an unfolding crisis most

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\(^{195}\) Rodgers, 410.

\(^{196}\) Ibid.
often leads those in power to a ramshackle construction of instinctive responses, “an eruption of the past into the present.” The consequence, Rodgers believes, is that crises “ratchet up the value of policy ideas that are waiting in the wings, already formed though not yet politically enactable”—in other words, those ideas which had reached American soil through an intellectual exchange with European reformers over the preceding decades.

Travel and exchange of information between Europe and America between the 1870s and 1940s sustained “transnational networks of debate,” and American progressives modified these ideas only about as much as social politics advocates in any other nation. As America’s “exceptionalism” bowed under the weight of the crisis, the New Dealers quietly imported German models of social insurance, British housing policies, Danish agricultural reforms, Australian labor relations programs, and a diverse array of unemployment measures. Rodgers notes that many of the New Deal reforms and social insurance programs had the most tenuous relation to economic recovery; the crisis was, rather, an opening whereby reformers could “throw into the breach…schemes set in motion years or decades before.” The great proliferation of policies in comparison to Europe, Rodgers argues, is only a result of the much greater “backlog” resulting from the unique institutional blockages of the American federal state—a process of “restriction and release.”

Despite the foreign origins of these policies, social reformers in austerity-darkened Europe found inspiration in the experimental energy of the New Deal compared to their own intellectual stagnation—particularly in Britain, where the contrast with Ramsay MacDonald’s ineffectual 1929-1931 Labour government could not have been more clear. “In no other nation in

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197 Rodgers, 412-413.
198 Rodgers, 412-413.
199 31
200 Rodgers, 415.
201 Rodgers, 415.
the North Atlantic economy,” Rodgers asserts, “was the progressive response to the world Depression of the 1930s as vigorous as in New Deal America.”

**Europe Outpaces America after the War**

It is in the post-World War Two era where a marked divergence emerges between the United States and Western Europe, where European social welfare policies continued to advance, while American progress slowed dramatically. To explain why the American welfare state failed to develop during this period, while reform leapt far ahead in Europe, requires an understanding of the competing explanations of what drives social policy development.

The welfare state question is, first of all, based on an arguable historical premise. As Rodgers points out, the building of a welfare state was not one of the goals of social movements on either side of the Atlantic before the post-war era. He illustrates this misconception by noting that the very term ‘welfare state’ itself originated in the United States – as a Republican epithet for New Deal social policies. And despite the pride with which today’s Labour Party politicians reiterate their party’s role in building Britain’s welfare state, the Attlee government came to adopt the term only reluctantly, after the Conservative rhetoric had successfully shifted it into normal public use.

Rodgers outlines four competing approaches to social politics in the post-1970 era. The first is the “social-democratic” explanation: that trade unions and social-democratic parties in Europe, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and New Deal Democrats in the United

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202. 410-411
203. Rodgers, 28
204. Rodgers, 28
205. Rodgers, 22.
States, promoted the adoption of social welfare policies “where the parliamentary position of the working class was strongest.”

Second, there is also the radical inversion of the social-democratic explanation: that welfare policies are “imposed as a set of rescue operations from above…[to] distract the working class from autonomous political mobilization, and forestall a genuine democratization of the social realm.”

A third explanation, the “institutional-political-process” approach, is distinguished by its opposition to the class-based analysis behind these two approaches. Rodgers finds evidence in this position:

This history of social policy shows equally clear examples of policies forced into legislation from below (old-age pensions in Britain in 1908) and from above (workingmen’s social insurance in Germany between 1883 and 1889). Governments are not only the meeting place of interests; their capacity for policy execution, their structured ways of coming to decisions, and the inertia of precedent all play unmistakable roles in social policy formation. (24)

This approach therefore holds that class is too simplistic a measure to describe the complex interplay of autonomous interests in the policy-making process.

Fourth is another radical explanation, which views the social welfare state as a panopticon constructed to enforce a discipline among beneficiaries which serves to maintain systems of power relations favored by those in power, “be they the nuclear family, the prevailing sexual conventions, or the dominant structure of aspirations.”

From a social-democratic perspective, the degree to which the United States does provide social benefits perhaps acts to serve the interests of capital as much those of labor. The American welfare state is primarily based on a liberal, social insurance model, funded by payroll-tax

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206 Rodgers, 22-24.
207 Rodgers, 22.
208 Rodgers, 23.
contributions which are tied to pay and work hours. As Esping-Andersen points out, this structure incentivizes greater worker productivity, and further:

with pensions, employers could – at others’ expense – rid themselves more easily of the older, less efficient workers…In summary, liberalism’s accommodation of social protection is in practice much more elastic than is normally thought, precisely because under certain conditions it promises to actually strengthen the commodity status of labor without adverse social effects.\(^{209}\)

In this sense, Social Security and similar programs are not a success in the face of capital, but an example of the extent to which a purely private economy can advance its interests through state institutions, with incidental benefits to working citizens.

The weakness of the American welfare-state project during the postwar period may be a result of its legacy of weak class-based political alignments and compromised ideologies. In Rodgers’s view:

When social democracy’s political moment finally came, in Britain and Scandinavia after the Second World War, the labor parties made the most of it; but they acted largely to expand policies already in place, constructed during a period when working-class parties had only brief and marginal access to power and deeply ambivalent feelings about its exercise.\(^{210}\)

This may be the key to understanding this postwar divergence. Although the legacy of social policy in the United States had relatively little influence from labor organizations, labor’s organizational role in American politics after the Second World War was quite similar to its European counterparts.

One major assertion of this type of argument was advanced by J. David Greenstone in 1969, whose work *Labor In American Politics* advanced the thesis that the AFL-CIO had become a “Democratic party organization” at both state and national levels.\(^{211}\) In Greenstone’s

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\(^{209}\) Esping-Andersen, Three Worlds, 43-4.
\(^{210}\) Rodgers, 24.
argument, U.S. unions had already by that point come to resemble European unions in two significant ways:

In the policy process, the American labor movement supports the continuous expansion of welfare-state measures. In national electoral politics, the unions have assumed many of the functions of the political campaign apparatus for the Democrats, the dominant party in the United States since 1930...In support of the Democrats as a mass pro-welfare-state party, American trade unions have forged a political coalition with important...structural and behavioral similarities to the socialist party-trade union alliances in Western Europe.  

Similarly, one might add, the social democratic parties of Western Europe have been similarly—although not identically—conservative in function.

Lichtenstein also points out the historical links between labor and the Democratic Party which functioned much like those of the mass labor parties of Western Europe, especially around 1950. By this time, and for decades after, Democratic candidates for president had launched all of their campaigns with a Labor Day rally in Detroit.  

Although blue-collar support for Democrats weakened following this period, the enfranchisement of black southerners in the 1960s is found to have increased class-voting in favor of Democrats overall.  

Examining Truman’s surprise victory in the 1948 election, Lichtenstein notes that he had won without the South, and as he describes, Truman’s victory “may well have been the most class-stratified of any winning president.”  

Yet, as Birnbaum points out, Truman’s actions did not match his rhetoric, and he was utterly opposed to trade-unionist proposals to give workers more power in industrial and political institutions.

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212 Greenstone, 4-7.
The influence of labor in the party throughout the 1950s was, indeed, full of promises and setbacks:

The unionization of more than one-third of all workers outside the south had given to American party politics a definite social democratic tinge; thus, in 1954 and 1958 liberal-labor forces would make substantial headway in both the House and the Senate. But these electoral shifts never bore the fruit expected of them, for the liberal wing of the Democratic Party could not bring to bear its full weight … The Democrats’ loss of both the House and the Senate in 1952 increased the strength of the Dixiecrat wing.²¹⁷

Thus, although labor’s influence was curtailed by the factionalism of the national Democratic Party, its influence was enough that there was no need to organize a new labor-based party.

**Conclusion: Can there be Social Democracy in the United States?**

Throughout this examination of American political development, answers to the original four questions may point towards a more satisfying explanation for why there is “no socialism” in the United States. First, the absence of a prominent socialist ideological tradition has been posed in the context of its opposition to liberalism, and more pragmatic explanations resulting from the peculiar development of national-level political coalitions. The arguments in favor of the Hartz thesis of a liberal tradition in America likely have some truth, but it is clear that liberalism, while often dominant, was never the sole ideological tradition in America. Hartz’s dismissal of southern provincialism as a minor quirk in America’s political development serves to obscure the major sectional and economic factors which led the social liberalism of the New Deal coalition to reject the most ambitious features of European social democracy.

Another question confronted is the lack of class-based political development throughout United States history. This is largely also the result of sectional and ethnic differences, and often illiberal ideologies which obscure the economic relations that a truly “liberal tradition” could

²¹⁷ Lichtenstein, the most dangerous, 319-21.
bring to the forefront. Pre-existing loyalties to the two major political parties likewise kept classes politically divided, as did the domination of sectional elites in both of the parties, in contrast to the poverty of their supporters.

This is closely related to the question of why there is no successful socialist or social-democratic political party in the United States. A definitive answer is elusive, because both the effects external factors of the American political system, and internal errors of socialist political organizing, are both plausible given the cyclical fits and starts common throughout American political history.

The expected outcome of a comprehensive social welfare state is arguably related to the question of why there is no socialism, because it is based on the assumption that the outcome—the welfare state—follows from the motives of those who sought one, presumably socialists. However, socialist activists throughout Europe did not make any major effort toward the building of the welfare state until after World War Two, when social democrats built upon the progressive scaffolding erected by liberal reformers earlier in the century. However, it is clear that the relative weakness of labor within the postwar New Deal coalition, and the conservatism of labor itself through the end of the New Deal, both contributed to weakening welfare-state development in the United States.

Ultimately changes in the makeup of American politics, and the class makeup of the American population, can only result in an increasing challenge to America’s exceptionalism over the next generation. It may be that there is not now socialism in the United States, and it may be that there is now not even social democracy in Europe. However, given the increasing cultural similarities of the United States to other developed countries, it can no longer be taken
for granted that progress will forever continue to pass by, leaving the United States untouched as it often has in the past.

Since the social democratic consensus common in Europe is characterized, broadly, by the melding of social welfare and industrial democracy, the absence of these ideas from American public policy, and the comparative weakness of labor, likely helps explain America’s significantly underdeveloped welfare state and historically weak regime of collective bargaining by workers.

Ahlquist notes that labor has been, and continues to be, a deciding player in the development of social-democratic policies in the developed world:

Where unions find themselves embedded in auspicious institutional settings that they initially helped create (strong centralized federations, the Ghent system, etc.), they have been able to remain an important part of the economic and political landscape. 218

Despite the decline in U.S. labor, labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein find some reason to believe that, despite the absence of a labor party, organized labor has, through its alliance with the northern sections of the Democratic party, constituted such a “social democratic bloc… episodically successful in broadening the welfare state, expanding citizenship rights, and defending the standard of living.” 219

To establish a standard for the welfare system our political system has thus far failed to provide, political scientist Lane Kenworthy has proposed a helpful “laundry list of left goals” which he believes would be present in a social democratic America: 220

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218 Ahlquist, 185.
- Universal health care
- One-year paid parental leave
- Universal early education
- Increase in the Child Tax Credit
- Sickness insurance
- Eased eligibility criteria for unemployment insurance
- Wage insurance
- Supplemental defined-contribution pension plan with automatic enrollment
- Extensive, personalized support with job search and (re)training
- Government as employer of last resort
- Minimum wage increased modestly and indexed to prices
- Earned Income Tax Credit extended farther up the income ladder and indexed to average compensation
- Social assistance with a higher benefit level and more support for employment
- Reduced incarceration of low-level drug offenders
- Affirmative action shifted to focus on family background rather than race
- Expanded government investment in infrastructure and public spaces
- Increase in paid holidays and vacation time

These policies, Kenworthy believes, exemplify the sort of welfare policies other developed countries have followed, but which America has not.

Yet this is a quite limited vision of what social democracy entails—no mention of social wages or democratic methods of industrial organization. Kenworthy also provides comparatively little to explain how the United States should achieve them, predicting (highly optimistically) that:

Policy makers, drawing on reason and evidence and perhaps with a push from organized interest groups or the populace, will recognize the benefits of a larger government role in pursuing economic security, opportunity, and rising living standards and will attempt to move the country in that direction… incremental…But it will have staying power.\textsuperscript{221}

Kenworthy, clearly, does not sufficiently account for the idiosyncratic development of American politics compared to other nations. In short, he assumes that a large public audience—not necessarily labor—would push for these policies, and that the continued expansion of the

\textsuperscript{221} Kenworthy, 12.
Democrats’ electoral base, and rational choices in policymaking, will result in the federal
government pursuing major expansions in the welfare state.222

Kenworthy argues, “Getting closer to the good society doesn’t require a radical break
from our historical path. It simply requires continuing along that path.”223 To believe this
requires serious amnesia regarding America’s “historical path.” This theory overlooks the
challenges posed by the weakness of class in American politics, the dominant neoliberal
paradigm that reigns in both major parties, and that the major roadblocks of the American
political system are more than simply an inconvenience, but a highly effective roadblock to
democracy. It is also not clear that what he is proposing is actually social democracy, or anything
more than progressive liberalism.

This process approach perhaps requires agreement with the view that social class is in
fact dying in the present age, the argument advanced by Clark and Lipset, who refer to social
class as an “increasingly outmoded concept…although it is sometimes appropriate to earlier
historical periods,” and that therefore the importance of strong labor organizations is
overstated.224 In their view, the left has been broken down into one blue-collar, economically-
focused left, and a more upscale, second left, whose main focus is on social issues.225

However, they may have underestimated the potential for rising inequality to bring class
back to the forefront, especially given that since the 1980s the wealthiest individuals gained
mainly from stocks—and thus ownership—than from salaries.226 Since private ownership by a
handful of powerful individuals is, therefore, still an integral driver of wealth accumulation, this

222 Kenworthy, 160.
223 Kenworthy, 175-6.
224 Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset, “Are Social Classes Dying?,” in The Breakdown of Class
Politics: A Debate on Post-industrial Stratification, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 40.
225 Clark and Lipset, 47.
226 Mike Hout, Clem Brooks, and Jeff Manza, “The Persistence of Classes in Post-Industrial Societies,” in The
Breakdown of Class Politics: A Debate on Post-industrial Stratification, eds. Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour
Martin Lipset, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 60.
holds important potential for shaping the political, and even electoral, context in which labor and capital interest manifest themselves in the political sphere. And given that ethnic, religious and geographic divisions have always posed an obstacle to fully class-conscious political mobilization in almost every country in the world, it is hardly a novel assertion that the left is too split for class to regain a significance it could never have been expected to achieve in the first place.\textsuperscript{227}

If the question is, as Foner puts it, the lack of a social-democratic or labor party in American politics, Lichtenstein, like Greenstone before him, offers the answer that labor has in fact had a significant political presence, and perhaps counter intuitively, that it has been getting stronger. Accordingly, Lichtenstein argues that in the twenty first century, labor has become a social-democratic wing of the Democratic Party itself. The strength of such a role, of course, depends heavily on the progressing irrelevance of southern interests within the national party, and the prominence of class-based economic divisions in the electorate.\textsuperscript{228}

In terms of present-day influence, Lichtenstein points first to the exodus of southerners from the Democratic coalition, and second, also counter-intuitively, to the decreased importance of manufacturing unions. Instead, in recent decades, labor relations have become “repoliticized,” even while, as he claims, “the strike weapon is dead.”\textsuperscript{229} The increased importance of public-sector unions, whose members now constitute a majority of the labor movement, is political by nature, he argues, because its members are so directly impacted by questions of public spending and public policy; the growing service sector is also important because subsidies, regulations,
and zoning approvals by governments are critical to service-sector industries and, therefore, service-sector unions are also engaging in problems that are as much political as industrial.\textsuperscript{230}

The unions, even in less unionized states, are still crucial to the Democrats’ electoral efforts. Therefore, in states where the Democrats are strong, the labor-Democratic alliance is more important than ever and, “conversely, the Republicans have sharpened their denunciation of this politicized unionism and through various legal gambits and referenda, including ‘paycheck protection’ laws proscribing union expenditure of member dues for political purses,” a direct attempt to break the now-existing link between labor and the Democrats at the state level.\textsuperscript{231}

What Lichtenstein’s analysis tells us is that Foner’s version of the question has been answered, and the answer will be unsatisfying to most. It is possible now to consider the Democrats as much a labor party as any in Europe today, in the sense that they have strong institutional links with the labor movement. After all, labor parties in Europe have long ceased to be a vehicle for social democracy—for today’s Democrats, becoming a labor party means joining the family of New Labour and Agenda 2010.

Ahlquist states the problem bluntly: “Ultimately, whether social democracy is a feasible development strategy for countries beyond a 60-year window in northwest Europe remains an open question.”\textsuperscript{232} As Rodgers notes, social scientists during the boom of the 1950s and 1960s assumed that:

the logic of surplus capital accumulation might by itself prove capable of repairing the social dislocations the capitalist revolutions in production had begun. Given expanding national incomes, their data seemed to show, social expenditures for education, welfare, and social services increased.

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{231} Lichtenstein, 225.
\textsuperscript{232} Ahlquist, 184.
However, this trend did not continue, he notes, and social scientists found themselves reaching for explanations, settling on the competing social-democratic and institutional-political process approaches. 233

Since 1980, the trend among all developed economies—including those of Europe—has been a dismantling of the social-democratic settlement. At present, even in the Nordic countries, the promotion of traditional social welfare policies has been largely abandoned and the few social-democratic parties that have managed to cling to power have been less strident in support of policies benefitting their working-class constituents. 234

The problem is not, then, that the United States has no labor party, but that the United States did not have one during a time when it could have been expected to make a significant difference in national economic policy. However, historical circumstances can change unexpectedly, and if it does so again, labor and the left could be better-positioned in the American political system than they have in a long time.

233 Rodgers, 22.
234 Kristal, 740.
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