

## *Why the US Working Class is Different*

In 1828—as Karl Marx once reminded his readers—a group of Philadelphia artisans organized the first ‘Labour Party’ in world history. Now, one hundred and fifty years later, a television news camera depicts a group of modern Philadelphia workers arguing in their local tavern over the candidates in the 1980 presidential election. Against a background of irreverent catcalls and hisses, one worker tepidly defends Carter as the ‘lesser evil’, while another, with even less ardour, tries to float the idea of a ‘protest’ vote for Reagan. Finally, with the nodding assent of most of the crowd, a rather definitive voice spells out the name of the popular choice in the campaign: N-O-T-A, (‘none of the above’). He underlines his point with the declaration that he intends to occupy a barstool rather than a polling booth on election day. In no other capitalist country is mass political abstentionism as fully developed as in the United States, where a ‘silent majority’ of the working class has sat out more than half the elections of the last century.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, this mute, atomized protest is the historical correlative of the striking absence of an independent political party of the proletariat

in the country that once invented both the labour party and May Day.

Perhaps no other dimension of American history is simultaneously as salient and as difficult for Marxist theory as the complex evolution of the economic class struggle in relation to a political system that has managed to repulse every attempt to create an alternative class politics. The absence of the level of working-class self-organization and consciousness represented in every other capitalist country by the prevalence of labourist, social-democratic, or Communist parties is the spectre that has long haunted American Marxism. As a first approach to the problem it may be useful briefly to review the perspective that 'classical' revolutionary theory has offered on 'American exceptionalism'.

### Classical Perspectives

At one time or another, Marx, Engels, Kautsky, Lenin, and Trotsky all became fascinated with the prospects for the development of a revolutionary movement in the United States. Although each emphasized different aspects of contemporary social dynamics, they shared the optimistic belief that 'in the long run' the differences between European and American levels of class consciousness and political organization would be evened out by objective laws of historical development. In their view the American working class was a more or less 'immature' version of a European proletariat. Its development had been retarded or deflected by various conjunctural and, therefore, *transient* conditions: the 'frontier', continuous immigration, the attraction of agrarian-democratic ideologies bound up with petty-bourgeois property, the international hegemony of American capital, and so on. Once these temporary conditions began to be eroded—through the closing of the frontier, the restriction of European immigration, the triumph of monopoly over small capital, the decline of US capital's lead in world industrial productivity—then more profound and permanent historical determinants arising out of the very structure of the capitalist mode of production would come into play. In this shared scenario, a systematic economic crisis of American society would unleash class struggles on a titanic scale. Furthermore the very breadth and violence of this economic class struggle would provoke escalating conflicts with state power. In such a crisis the bourgeois-democratic institutions of American society—previously an obstacle to class coalescence—would provide a springboard for independent political action and the formation of a mass labour or socialist party. Stages of development that had taken the European proletariat generations to traverse would be 'compressed' in America by an accelerated process of 'combined and uneven development'.

Thus Engels, writing in 1886, had little doubt that the dramatic growth of the Knights of Labor together with the massive vote for Henry George in New York City's mayoralty election signalled the birth of

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<sup>1</sup> 'The United States has consistently had the highest absentee rate to be found in any Western political system during the past fifty years'. Walter Dean Burnham, 'The United States: The Politics of Heterogeneity', in Richard Rose, (ed.), *Electoral Behaviour: a Comparative Handbook*, New York and London 1974, p. 697.

mass labour politics in America. (Engels, in fact, exhorted the 'backward' English labour movement to take these more 'advanced' American events as their model.) A similar conclusion was drawn by Lenin with regard to the apparent giant strides of the Socialist Party in the elections of 1912, and by Trotsky when, in the aftermath of the great sit-down strikes of 1936–37, a labour party again seemed likely to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

### False Promises

Unfortunately, all these hopes for a qualitative political transformation of the class struggle in the United States have remained stillborn. The premonitory signs of a political break in the middle eighties turned out to be spurious, as renewed ethnic and racial divisions undermined the embryonic unification of Eastern industrial workers. Fledgling 'labour parties' collapsed as workers were successfully reabsorbed into a capitalist two-party system that brilliantly manipulated and accentuated cultural schisms in the working class. Likewise the 6% of the presidential vote that Gene Debs won in 1912—internationally acclaimed as the beginning of the Socialist Party's ascent to majority representation of the American proletariat—turned out to be its high-water mark, followed by bitter conflict and fragmentation. This socialist fratricide was, in turn, a manifestation and symptom of the profound antagonisms within the early-twentieth-century labour movement between organized 'native' craftsmen and the unorganized masses of immigrant labourers.

The Great Depression furnished the most ironic experience of all. Despite a cataclysmic collapse of the productive system and the economic class war that the crisis unleashed, the political battles of American capitalism held firm. Indeed it can be argued that the hegemony of the political system was reinforced and extended. The same workers who defied the machine guns of the National Guard at Flint or chased the deputies off the streets during the semi-insurrectionary Minneapolis General Strike were also the cornerstone of electoral support for Roosevelt. The millions of young workers aroused by the struggle for industrial unionism were simultaneously mobilized as the shock troops of a pseudo-aristocratic politician whose avowed ambition was 'the salvation of American capitalism'. To the extent that so-called 'labour' or 'farmer-labour' parties emerged in industrial areas of the midwest or north-east they remained scarcely more than advance detachments and satellites of the New Deal.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Letters to Americans, 1848–1895*, New York 1953, pp. 149–150, 239, 243–244, and 258; V.I. Lenin, 'In America', *Collected Works*, vol. 36, p. 215; Leon Trotsky 'Introduction', *Living Thoughts of Karl Marx*, New York, 1939; Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880–1938*, NLB/London 1979, pp. 58, 102. Also R. Laurence Moore, *European Socialists and the American Promised Land*, New York 1970; Cristiano Camporesi, *Il marxismo teorico negli USA*, Milan 1973; Harvey Klehr, 'Marxist Theory in Search of America', *Journal of Politics*, 35, 1973, and 'Leninist Theory in Search of America', *Polity*, 9, 1976; Lewis Feuer, *Marx and the Intellectuals*, New York 1969.

## Analysing the US Working Class

Thus, in spite of the periodic intensity of the economic class struggle and the episodic appearance of 'new lefts' in every generation since the Civil War, the rule of capital has remained more powerfully installed and less politically contested than in any other advanced capitalist social formation. In the face of this dilemma, and given the apparent inadequacy of the theory of the American working class as an 'immature proletariat', what other perspectives are available for conceptualizing the problem of an absent political class consciousness in the United States?

One strategy might be to shift theoretical focus from the dialectic of conjunctural constraints acting upon universal processes (the global logic of class struggle and class consciousness), and to emphasize, instead, the relative permanence of the decisive sociological or cultural features that have historically differentiated the United States. This is the approach of the current of idealist interpretations of American 'civilization' from Tocqueville to Hartz, including the Commons-Perlman school of labour historiography, which has tried to locate the originality of American history in constitutive essences like the 'absence of feudalism' or the 'ubiquity of job consciousness'. From the standpoint of this liberal metaphysics the problem of working-class consciousness is no problem at all: the political incorporation of the industrial proletariat was predestined even before its birth by the very structure of American culture—the lack of feudal class struggles, the hegemony of a Lockean world-view, the safety-valve of the frontier, and so on. Conversely, socialist consciousness is seen as the result of industrialization in a specifically European socio-historical setting littered with relics of feudalism. Unfortunately, traces of this grandiose but vulnerable ahistoricism have tinged the writings of some Marxist writers who have also tried to explain the specificity of the American working class in terms of some grand peculiarity of US history, such as the impact of immigration or the role of early mass suffrage.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, an alternative methodology both to the old Marxist 'orthodoxy' with its faith in the eventual 'normalization' of the class struggle in the US, and the various theories of American exceptionalism with their emphasis on the passive submission of the working class to omnipotent socio-historical determinants. The point of departure is to reconstruct the basic frames of reference.

On the one hand we must discard the idea that the fate of the American working class has been shaped by any overarching *telos* (liberal democracy, cultural individualism, or whatever) or clockwork of simple, interacting causes (upward mobility plus ethnicity plus . . .). All plausible explanatory variables must be concretized within the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, New York 1955, and *The Founding of New Societies*, New York 1964; and Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement*, New York 1928. An exhaustive inventory of 'single factor' theories of the exceptionalism of the American labour movement is undertaken by John Laslett and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds.), *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism*, New York 1974.

historically specific contexts of class struggle and collective practice which, after all, are their only real mode of existence. Against such positivist conceptions of a working class permanently shipwrecked on 'reefs of roast beef' (Sombart)<sup>4</sup> or shoals of universal suffrage (Hartz *et al.*), Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky were absolutely correct to affirm the central role of class struggle in the making of American history and in the periodic renewal of opportunities for the transformation of class consciousness.

On the other hand, the Marxist classics tended to underestimate the role of the sedimented historical experiences of the working class as they influenced and circumscribed its capacities for development in succeeding periods. Each major cycle of class struggle, economic crisis, and social restructuring in American history has finally been resolved through epochal tests of strength between capital and labour. The results of these historical collisions have been new structural forms that regulated the objective conditions for accumulation in the next period as well as the subjective capacities for class organization and consciousness. *What the emphasis on the 'temporary' character of obstacles to political class consciousness tended to obscure was precisely the cumulative impact of the series of historic defeats suffered by the American working class.* As I will attempt to show in this essay, each generational defeat of the American labour movement disarmed it in some vital respect before the challenges and battles of the following period.

The ultimate, though by no means preordained, trajectory of this disrupted history has been the consolidation of a kind of relationship between the American working class and American capitalism that stands in striking contrast to the balance of class forces in other capitalist states. It is a question not merely of the 'absence of social democracy'—although this is the most dramatic symptom—but of a qualitatively different level of class consciousness and intra-class cohesion.

Despite profound differences in national tradition as well as evident divergences in the levels of class conflict, all the proletariats of Western Europe are politically 'incorporated'—I use this term only in a highly qualified and contingent sense—through the agency of labour reformism. That is, their relationship to capitalism is mediated and regulated at a multiplicity of levels (political, economic and cultural) by *collective, self-formed institutions* that tend to create and maintain a corporate class consciousness. Certainly, in the post-war period European workers have increasingly become subject to the 'Americanizing' influence of a socially disintegrative model of mass culture and consumption, yet the solidity of working-class culture is remarkable and remains the infrastructure for socialist and communist politics throughout Western Europe.

The American working class, on the other hand, lacking a rich panoply of collective institutions or any totalizing agent of class consciousness (that is, a class party), has been increasingly integrated into American

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<sup>4</sup> For Sombart, see Jerome Karabel, 'The Failure of American Socialism Reconsidered', *Socialist Register—1979*, London.

capitalism through the *negativities* of its internal stratification, its privatization in consumption, and its disorganization *vis-à-vis* political and trade union bureaucracies. As Ira Katznelson has emphasized, the absence of “global” institutions and meaning systems of class’ in America has led to an extreme fragmentation and serialization of the work, community and political universes of the American proletariat.<sup>5</sup> The proposed distinction, therefore, is between a *reformist* working class in Western Europe—historically janus-faced in the irreducible tensions of its integrated and potentially revolutionary aspects—and a ‘*disorganized*’ and increasingly ‘*depoliticized*’ working class in the United States.

I must stress, however, that this differentiation was not inscribed, once and for all, in some primordial matrix of historical or structural conditions. If anything, this contrast has only acquired its sharpest visibility and salience during the post-war wave of economic expansion when there has been, for the first time in history, a general tendency in Western Europe—or at least the EEC countries—toward a stabilization of parliamentary democracy and the growth of mass consumption. In other words, it is precisely in the period of the most well-defined structural convergence and homogenization of political terrains that the profound differences in the historical formation of the American and European proletariats have become most striking and politically consequential. What this suggests is that the watershed of ultimate significance in creating the divergence between European and American levels of proletarian class consciousness was the failure of the labour movements of the 1930’s and 1940’s to unify the American working class on either the economic or the political planes.

An analysis of this pivotal conjuncture of course requires some treatment of the accumulation of previous defeats which conditioned its outcome. The present article aims to be a kind of historical preface to an analysis of the contemporary crisis of class consciousness in the United States. Focusing on the changing interfaces between the economic class struggles, class composition, and the political system, I have attempted to trace the chain of historic ‘defeats’ and blocked possibilities that have negatively determined the position of the working class in post-war society. This problematic of the ‘unmaking’ of the American working class is argued in three steps:

*First*, by examining the unique course of bourgeois democratic revolution in the United States in relation to the emergence of a factory working class and its failure to achieve any initial political autonomy.

*Second*, by surveying the contradictory relationship between unifying waves of labour militancy and the turbulent recomposition of the proletariat by European immigration and internal migration. In particular I will focus on the successive failures of ‘labour abolitionism,’ ‘labour populism,’ and Debsian socialism to provide durable founda-

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<sup>5</sup> Ira Katznelson, ‘Considerations on Social Democracy in the United States’, *Comparative Politics*, October 1978, pp. 95–96.

tions for the growth of independent class politics or to generate the sociological supports for a unitary proletarian sub-culture.

*Third* (in a second instalment—NLR 124), by considering, in magnified detail, the legacy of the class struggles of the Roosevelt-Truman era in contributing to the current disorganization and weakness of working-class consciousness and militancy in the United States.

I must also offer the reader this *caveat* at the beginning: The set of historical determinants deployed in this analysis—the role of early mass suffrage, class composition, and so on—is purposely selective and seeks only to explicate certain relationships that I believe are both crucial and frequently misconstrued. A truly rigorous theoretical analysis would obviously have to consider other factors as well. In particular I provide only cursory accounts of three variables that would need to be much more centrally assimilated in a fuller analysis: the specificity of the political structure and the party system; the role of *pre-emptive* political repression in blocking the emergence of working-class radicalism; and the significance of the unique productivity differential enjoyed by American capital for most of its history.<sup>6</sup>

## I. The Paradox of American ‘Democracy’

There have been two, ‘ideal-typical’ historical paths by which independent labour politics have emerged in industrializing societies. The first embracing continental Europe—has involved the precipitation of a proletarian current in the course of bourgeois-democratic revolution. The second, later route—followed by Britain and most of its white-settler offspring (Australia, New Zealand, and Canada)—has passed through the transformation of trade-union militancy by economic crisis, state repression, and the rise of new working-class strata.<sup>7</sup> In this section I will examine some of the most important reasons why the political terrain in the early American Republic was so unfavourable to the first of these processes.

In every European nation the working classes were forced to conduct protracted struggles for suffrage and civil liberties. The initial phases of the active self-formation of the European working classes encompassed both elementary economic organization and rudimentary political mobilization for democratic rights. Every European proletariat forged its early identity through revolutionary-democratic mass movements:

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<sup>6</sup> The solitary, synoptic analysis of the role of repression in deradicalizing the American labour movement is Robert Justin Goldstein’s pathbreaking *Political Repression in Modern America*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1978. Burnham provides a fascinating overview of the specificity of American electoral institutions and their success in diluting working class political power in ‘The United States: The Politics of Heterogeneity’. Finally, I have drawn on the work of Michel Aglietta to discuss the ‘capital-logic’ of American labour struggles in my ‘“Fordism” in Crisis’, *Review*, Binghamton, Fall 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Of course combinations of both paths are also possible as in the case of Britain which experienced first Chartism as a mass—and premier—revolutionary-democratic movement of the working class; then, after a long interlude of apparently successful incorporation of the proletariat within the two-party system, the rise of the Labour Party in response to the New Unionism, Taff Vale, war-time repression, etc.

Chartism in Britain (1832–48), the Lasallean and ‘Illegal’ periods of German labour (1860–85), the bitter struggle of Belgian labour for the extension of the vote, the battle against absolutism in Russia (1898–1917).

In the face of the treason or weakness of the middle classes, the young working-class movements were forced to carry on the democratic struggle through their own independent mobilization. Thus the strength of proletarian radicalism and the degree of its conscious self-reliance were conditioned by both the relative social power of the bourgeoisie and the extent to which the democratic revolution had been left ‘unfinished.’ In a general sense, we can distinguish three kinds of national contexts in which an original coalescence of economic and political class consciousness took place: 1. against a hegemonic bourgeoisie in the context of a restricted franchise (Britain or Belgium in the nineteenth century); 2. within the framework of an on-going bourgeois-democratic revolution (France in 1848–52); or (3) in the absence or impossibility of a bourgeois-democratic revolution, against both the pre-capitalist and bourgeois ruling classes at the same time (Russia in 1905–17—the pattern of ‘permanent revolution’). The impetus of working-class militancy was different in each case, yet in all cases some mode of proletarian political independence (be it a nonviolent petitioning campaign or a centralized underground party) was a necessary prerequisite.

#### US Democracy: Merchants and Farmers

In the United States, on the other hand, a very different politico-juridical framework was present during the infancy of the working class. The most obvious fact, which impressed itself on every Old World visitor, was the absence of residual pre-capitalist class structures and social institutions. Indeed as the Hartzian school has emphasized, the Northern colonies were a transplanted ‘fragment’ of the most advanced production relations and ideological superstructures of the seventeenth century: British merchant and agrarian capitalism, Puritan religion, and Lockean philosophy. Long after their official suppression in Britain, New England popular consciousness safeguarded the radical doctrines of the English Revolution and continued to translate them into practice. By no later than 1750, for example, somewhere between one half and three quarters of the adult white males in New England, including much of the artisanal population, were already exercising a local franchise. By Andrew Jackson’s second term in 1832, property qualifications had been removed in all but four of the states.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in dramatic contradistinction to Europe, popular sovereignty (for white males) was the *pre-existent* ideological and institutional framework for the industrial revolution and the rise of the proletariat.

Another, almost equally important difference between Europe and America was the class composition of the leadership of the democratic

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Edward McChesney Sait, *American Parties and Elections*, New York 1939, pp. 21–31; and Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage from Property to Democracy*, Princeton 1960.

movement. In Europe bourgeois liberalism had (at least until 1848) generally taken a position of adamant opposition to 'democracy.' Its strategic aim was to mobilize the plebeian masses against aristocratic power without thereby being forced to concede universal suffrage. The manipulation of the English working classes by the Whigs in reform struggles of the 1820s and early 1830s is a classic case. To the extent that the bourgeois revolution actually became a 'democratic' revolution, it was because elements of the plebeian strata (urban artisans, petty bourgeoisie, declassed intellectuals, supported by the multitudes of journeymen, labourers, and sections of the peasantry) violently assumed leadership, usually in the context of a life-or-death threat to the survival of the revolution or temporizing betrayal by the haute bourgeoisie (France in 1791 or Germany in 1849). Furthermore, by the 1830s surviving elements of this plebeian Jacobinism were rapidly being transformed, under the impact of industrialism, into a proletarian proto-socialism (Blanquism, the Communist League, etc.).

In the United States, by contrast, the commanding heights of the bourgeois-democratic 'revolution' were dominated, without significant challenge, by the political representatives of the American bourgeoisie. Thus, in a certain ironic sense, the American bourgeoisie (in a definition encompassing historically specific configurations of large merchants, bankers, big capitalist landowners or planters, and, later, industrialists) was the only 'classical' revolutionary-democratic bourgeoisie in world history: all other bourgeois-democratic revolutions have depended, to one degree or another, upon plebeian wings or 'surrogates' to defeat aristocratic reaction and demolish the structure of the ancien regimes.

This was partly a result of the fact that the 'bourgeois-democratic' revolution in America was not an uprising against a moribund feudalism, but rather a unique process of capitalist national liberation involving, in the period from 1760 to 1860, a multi-phase struggle against the constraints that a globally hegemonic British capital imposed on the growth of native bourgeois society. It is possible to see the Revolution of 1776, for instance, as very much a civil war against Loyalist comprador strata, and the Civil War as a continuing revolution against an informal British imperialism that had incorporated the cotton export economy of the South in an alliance of neo-colonial dependency. In the first phase a merchant-planter coalition overthrew the obstacles to internal expansion, and in the second, an alliance of fledgling industrial capital and western farmers created the preconditions for national economic integration.

Moreover the American bourgeoisie was able to rely upon exceptional class alliances to consolidate its hegemony. The existence in the United States of a numerically dominant class of small capitalist farmers—a class with virtually no equivalent in mid-nineteenth-century Europe where agriculture was predominantly operated by semi-aristocratic landowners or subsistence peasants—provided secure social anchorage for an explicitly bourgeois politics celebrating the sanctity of private property and the virtue of capital accumulation. Since the ideology of the industrial bourgeoisie found such direct resonance in the entre-

preneurial outlook of the majority of the Northern agrarian class, mass democratic politics did not pose the same kind of dangers as they did in most of Europe where the middle strata or petty bourgeoisie were so much weaker in the nineteenth century. In other words, while the European bourgeoisie had to fight long delayed actions (frequently in alliance with residual aristocracies) against the advance of a broad franchise which they feared would give power to workers and peasants, the industrial fraction of the American bourgeoisie, relying on the stabilizing social ballast of the farmers, was able to achieve national political dominance in 1860 at the head of the revolutionary-democratic crusade against slavocracy and its international allies.<sup>9</sup>

### The Conservatism of the Democratic Movement

As Perlman noted many years ago, this particular constellation of historical factors—the existence of a ‘democratic’ bourgeoisie and the correlative absence of an ‘ancien regime’—made it much more difficult for artisans and workers to constitute themselves as an autonomous force in the politics of the antebellum era. The same factors also gave the democratic movement in America its relatively ‘conservative’ cast. In contrast with the anti-feudal revolutions of France or Spain, for example, there was no broad, radical assault on the legitimating institutions and ideology of society which might later serve as a model for working-class revolutionism. The plebeian colonial masses did not rise up under the leadership of their planter and mercantile ‘revolutionaries’ in 1776 to ignite a worldwide democratic revolution—as the *sans-culotte* followers of Saint-Just and Robespierre would aspire to do a few years later—but rather to defend the special gift of popular liberty that God and Locke had granted their Puritan ancestors. Similarly, in arousing the North in 1861, Lincoln and the Republicans vehemently rejected the revolutionary slogans of Garrison and the Abolitionists (the extension of ‘equal rights’ to Afro-Americans and the destruction of the slave order) to appeal, instead, to the ‘preservation of the Union and Free *White* Labour’. These ideological nuances have far more than incidental significance; they testify both to the solidity of bourgeois political domination and to the inhibition of ‘permanent democratic revolution’ in America.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Southern planters exercised an analogous hegemony over the small white farmers of the Southern lowlands and plains. The cement of this ideological adhesion was not so much pseudo-aristocratic paternalism as a degenerate Jeffersonian liberalism. For all their manorial trappings, ‘ultras’ like Calhoun stood far closer to the radical Whig tradition than to high Toryism. Appeals to states’ rights and individualism were buttressed by the vision of a permanently expanding slave frontier that perpetually renewed the possibilities for small-scale accumulation and ascent into the big planter stratum. This white supremacist democracy of the Southern *Herrenvolk* mirrored many of the same central themes (e.g. entrepreneurial egalitarianism) as Northern capitalist ideology.

<sup>10</sup> Marx’s theory of ‘permanent revolution’, it will be recalled, was an integral element in his strategic reflections on the dynamic of the failed German democratic revolution of 1848–1850. It projected the possibility that the revolutionary-democratic movement might, under certain circumstances, ‘grow over’ into a struggle for a ‘social republic’ led by an independent worker-peasant wing. More generally it pointed to the conditions that created the possibility of a hegemonic working-class jacobinism as a prelude to socialism.

## 'Producers' and 'Citizens'

All this should not be taken to mean that the artisanal or early industrial working classes in America were without clearly conceived interests or articulate voices of their own. Yet, without underestimating the economic militancy of the early working class or its devotion to the struggle against 'Oligarchy', it is necessary to emphasize the structural and cultural obstacles to any thoroughgoing radicalization of the democratic movement and to the crystallization of an autonomous proletarian politics. While American workers provided shock troops in defence of 'Equal Rights', they never created independent political movements with the influence or historical impact of Chartism or French socialism. The famous Workingmen's Parties of 1828–1832, which the young Marx celebrated as the first parties of labour, may seem an obvious exception. But the 'Workies' were a socially composite movement whose concept of the 'working man' had such catholic inclusivity that only bankers, speculators, and a few Tammany Hall bosses were doctrinally excluded. The working man's movement of the 1830s undoubtedly did focus and express the concerns of pre-industrial workers, strengthened impulses toward trade union organization, and trained labourers in the art of politics; but it never achieved more than the most preliminary level of political self-consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

Incipient class consciousness was blunted by two illusions: one economic, the other political. The first grew out of the prevalence of petty production and small property which created, if not the fabled Jacksonian age of universal mobility, then at least a significantly greater fluidity of class boundaries between journeymen and the layer of small entrepreneurs. The result was an ideology of 'Producerism' that mapped class relations along an axis of 'producers' versus 'parasitic money power' and conflated all strata of workers and most capitalists into a single 'industrial' bloc. This petty-bourgeois outlook, constructed from the standpoint of the sphere of circulation rather than the labour process, did not really begin to break down until the great crisis of 1873–1877 brought capital and labour into confrontation on a *national* scale for the first time.

The political illusion, closely interwoven with a false perception of class relationships, was the popular view of the state as an agency of democratic reform. The existence of a unique and more or less unrestricted white manhood suffrage imparted to the Jacksonian working class a deep belief in the exceptionalism of American society. Unlike their European brothers who experienced both the absence of political and economic freedom, white American working men came to contrast their political liberty with their economic exploitation. In his study of the transformation of artisan shoemakers of Lynn (Mass.) into a dependent factory proletariat, Alan Dawley repeatedly emphasizes their persistent belief that they possessed 'a vested interest in the existing political system'. Whereas European workers tended to view the state as 'an instrument of their oppression, controlled by hostile social and economic interests, against which it was necessary to organize in

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Walter Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class*, Stanford 1960.

separate class parties; American workers tended to cling to the illusion of an ameliorative “popular sovereignty”.<sup>12</sup>

### The Struggle for Economic Self-Organization

Yet it would be foolish to overstate this point.<sup>13</sup> The political ‘incorporation’ of native workers in the antebellum era had definite limits, and any attempt unilaterally to explain the deradicalization of the working class through the integrative powers of mass democracy must necessarily flounder on the contradictory implications of its own premises. Nineteenth-century labour history proved time and again that the very parliamentary illusions borne by the native working class also carried subversive potentials. In the face of increasing exploitation and class polarization, for example, the egalitarian ideology of American labourers (like the New England shoemakers) could become a powerful catalyst for collective organization (creating the New England Mechanics’ Association), as well as for militant resistance (unleashing the Great Strike of 1860). European factory masters could frequently command ancestral patterns of lower-class deference and cultural subordination, but the American industrialists had to deal with ‘free-born’ Yankee workers who rejected paternalism and demanded to be treated as equals. From the Jacksonian period onward, the native working class ethos of ‘Equal Rights’—so deeply ingrained by the mass upheavals of 1776, 1828, and 1861—came increasingly into collision with the emergence of the factory system and the concentration of economic power.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, these ideological tensions were amplified by the exceptional violence of the battle for union recognition in the United States. The precocity of working-class suffrage as an integrative force in America must be balanced against the great difficulty of Yankee trade unions in achieving durable organization. To make a comparison to the British case: if American workmen possessed an unrestricted vote over half a century earlier than their English counterparts, they also had to struggle almost a generation longer in the face of hostile courts and intransigent employers to consolidate their first craft unions. American labour may never have had to face the carnage of a Paris Commune or defeated revolution, but it has been bled in countless ‘Peterloos’ at the hands of Pinkertons or the militia.

It seems a tenable hypothesis, therefore, that widespread legal repression, especially when coupled with the impact of industrialism and

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1976, pp. 235, 237.

<sup>13</sup> As I believe Alan Dawley does when he claims that ‘the ballot box was the coffin of class consciousness’. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> Popular democratic tradition most dramatically asserted itself in the repeated justification of armed self-defence against ‘tyranny’. Thus in the 1880s when some unions began to form their own ‘militias’ in response to employer and state violence, the *Labor Leaf* of Detroit could advise its readers that ‘every union ought to have its company of sharp-shooters . . . learn to preserve your rights in the same way your forefather did’. Richard Oestreicher, ‘Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1877–1895’, PhD Thesis, Michigan State University 1979, p. 280.

cyclical crisis upon mobility and wages, might undermine the working class's fundamental illusions in bourgeois political leadership. In this context it is relevant to recall the example of a *second path* toward working-class political independence represented by the labour parties of other 'democratic' Anglo-Saxon nations, particularly where this process has involved—as in Edwardian England or post-war Canada—the breakdown of previous political incorporation within bourgeois parties (primarily Liberal Parties). Certainly, to the extent that state repression or economic depression was a midwife to the birth of labour parties (a point that I will weigh again in the following section), late-nineteenth-century or early-twentieth-century America possessed the ingredients in full measure. Why then—despite several partial ruptures and temporary defections—did American labour fail to take advantage of broad suffrage to forge its own political instruments? The next stage in answering this question is to shift focus from the constitution of the political system to the historical composition of the working class.

## II. Political Consciousness and Class Composition

The increasing proletarianization of the American social structure has not been matched by an equal tendency toward the homogenization of the working class as a cultural or political collectivity. Stratifications rooted in differential positions in the social labour process have been reinforced by deep-seated ethnic, religious, racial, and sexual antagonisms within the working class. In different periods these divisions have fused together as definite intra-class hierarchies (for example, 'native + skilled + Protestant versus 'immigrant + unskilled + Catholic') representing unequal access to employment, consumption, legal rights, and trade union organization. The real political power of the working class within American 'democracy' has always been greatly diluted by the effective disfranchisement of large sectors of labour: blacks, immigrants, women, migrant workers, among others.

Periodically in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the search for defensive organization at the workplace produced waves of mass struggle that temporarily overrode or weakened some of these divisions, and led to the formation of a succession of avowedly unitary economic organizations of the working class. But until the 1930s—and then only under the peculiar circumstances that I will analyse later—no comparable dynamic emerged on the political plane. The most victimized and disfranchised sectors of the working class had to seek political equality by their own efforts, and usually through incorporation within the multi-class coalitional base of one or other of the capitalist parties. To the discomfort of many Marxists as well as economic determinists of the Beardian school, all recent analysis of mass voting patterns in the US between 1870 and 1932 have corroborated the persistent primacy of *ethno-religious* cleavages as determinants of party loyalty and voting preference.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The ethno-cultural interpretation of American voting behaviour was first proposed by Lee Benson in his major revisionist work, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case*, Princeton 1961. The most ambitious recent work in this genre, preparatory to an overall synthesis and marshalling a formidable array of the

This contradictory dialectic of class unification/class stratification, and the corresponding tendency toward the bifurcation or disarticulation of workplace and political consciousness, needs to be examined more concretely within the specific contexts of the three waves of mass struggle that stand out as the key phases in the formation of the industrial proletariat in America: 1. the early battles for trade unionism and a shorter working day, 1832–1860; 2. the volcanic postbellum labour insurgencies of 1877, 1884–87, and 1892–96; and 3. the great tide of strikes from 1909 to 1922, which was only superficially punctuated by the 1914–15 recession.

All periodizations are somewhat arbitrary and risk obscuring important continuities and causal linkages, but I believe that these three periods define integral generations of working-class consciousness shaped by common experiences of economic militancy, each culminating in crises that temporarily posed the question of independent political action. The problem at hand is to consider the roles of racism and nativism in preventing American workers from ‘seizing the time’ in the pivotal turning points of class struggle—above all 1856–7, 1892–6, 1912, and 1919–24—when political realignment seemed most possible and necessary.

## Labour and the Civil War

The long decade from 1843 to 1856 was the crucible of an explosive mix of socio-economic transformations: the rise of mechanized consumer-goods industries in New England, the rapid capitalization of Midwestern agriculture, the acquisition of the Pacific Slope and the Southwest, and the fitful booms and expansionist demands of King Cotton. It was also an era of complex transition in the social structure. The new Western cities and towns still provided something of the famous ‘safety valve’ of social mobility, but the factory towns and great port cities of the Eastern seaboard witnessed the hardening of class lines and the constriction of opportunities for economic independence. The traditional artisanal working class, with its vague and fluid boundaries with the petty bourgeoisie, had become partially superseded by two new strata of workers: first, the emergent factory proletariat rooted in the shoe and textile industries of New England, and second, the nomadic armies of largely immigrant labour who moved across the face of the North building railways and digging canals.

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latest quantitative weaponry, is Paul Kleppner’s *The Third Electoral System, 1853–1892: Parties, Voters and Political Cultures*, Chapel Hill 1979. A critical acceptance of the overwhelming evidence for the significance of this religious divide does not, of course, imply concurrence with the ‘new political history’s’ interpretative tendency to marginalize class as a factor in American history. Whatever their theoretical pretensions, the current crop of historical voting studies only inflict fatal damage on an older Turner-Beard calculus of ‘economic interest groups’. Rather than dispelling class struggle from centre-stage, these studies only challenge Marxists to theorize more rigorously the *refraction* of class differences through a singular American ethno-religious prism. Cf. Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers’ Millennium*, New York 1978, and James E. Wright, ‘The Ethno-cultural Model of Voting: A Behavioural and Historical Critique’, in Allan Bogue (ed.), *Emerging Theoretical Models in Social and Political History*, Beverly Hills 1973.

In the *Sturm und Drang* of labour's infancy, romantic longings for imaginary past idylls coexisted with realistic intimations of the future. Time and again, in a pattern which would repeat itself almost to the eve of the twentieth century, the labour movement was deflected by utopian enthusiasms for monetary panaceas or free land schemes that would roll back industrialism and re-establish an ideally harmonized, 'Republican social order' of small producers. At the same time, however, more hard-headed militants, sensing the inevitability of economic change and influenced by the model of British labour, began to dig in for the long struggle. From the mid-1830s onwards, journeymen in the big port cities began to assert their separate economic interests, organizing their own benefit societies and early trade unions. Over the next two decades the centre of gravity of this union movement began to shift either to skilled workers in the new mechanized industries like the cotton spinners and shoemakers, or towards the craftsmen who made the machines, like the engineers, iron puddlers, and moulders. Unfortunately their efforts were rewarded by few permanent successes: the broad Ten Hour Day agitation of the 1840s rose and fell, a first generation of trade unions perished in the Panic of 1837, a second in the Depression of 1857, and, finally, on the eve of the Civil War, the most powerful trade union in North America—the New England Mechanics' Association (shoemakers)—was crushed after a long strike.

More important than this ebb and flow, however, were the residue of consciousness and embryonic class unity left behind, and the way in which this emergent 'labourism' fitted into the overall political conjuncture. As I have already indicated, the Jacksonian era had seen the rise within the labouring class of an awareness of the incompatibility of great concentrations of capital with the preservation of egalitarianism. This consciousness was only partially dissipated by the utopian fads and various Western booms. By the end of Jackson's second term, for instance, the New York 'Workies' resurrected themselves as the 'Locofoco' insurgency within the Democratic Party. Although Locofocoism represented the incorporation of the formerly independent 'workingmen's' movements into the regular party system, it also achieved a dramatic reorientation of both parties to 'labour' as a growing voting bloc. The attempt by President Van Buren—Jackson's chosen successor and the hero of the Locofocos—to establish a ten-hour day for federal employers was a symbolic concession to this new power.

Furthermore, by the 1850s an accumulation of conditions existed for a new and more coherent crystallization of working-class political identity. In many manufacturing towns the decline of the autonomous artisan was almost complete and the outlines of the new class structure were becoming increasingly apparent and disturbing. Thus, in her careful study of the industrialization of Newark crafts between 1800 and 1860, Susan Hirsch emphasizes that the 1850s were the watershed decade when inter-class mobility disappeared and 'the membership of the classes became fixed.'<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Susan E. Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class*, Philadelphia 1978, p. 79.

Coincident with this consolidation of class divisions was the eruption of new ideological issues in national politics and the breakdown of old class alliances. In 1857, just as the old party system was decomposing against the background of guerrilla warfare in Kansas, a severe economic crisis brought massive joblessness and industrial unrest to Northern cities. This conjuncture of economic and political crisis would seem to have offered a propitious opportunity for American labour, or at least its advanced detachments, to project its own leadership in the political arena. In particular, it would seem to have been the moment for drawing together separate strands of democratic reform by uniting the dual issues of chattel and wage slavery.

The concept of such a *labour abolitionism* actually existed. Albert Brisbane, Robert Owen, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglas espoused it, Marx and Engels cheered it on from across the seas, a few militant workmen tried to realize it. But in the event it was a stillborn crusade. Despite the dramatic growth of the factory proletariat and the sharpening of the economic class struggle, no new workingmen's party or locofoco-ist insurgency emerged in the 1850s to constitute a 'labour wing' of the Lincoln coalition. And in the absence of a working class anti-slavery current, labour lost the chance to forge its own links of unity with the black masses of the South or to create its own revolutionary-democratic political tradition.

Labour's inability to become an independent political actor in the greatest national crisis in American history was due, in part, to the fact that the initial process of industrialization had tended to *fragment rather than unify* the working class. The 'workies' of 1829–34 were able to draw upon the commonality of their artisanal culture and a fused tradition of protestant-democratic nationalism. In the following decades, however, three powerful centrifugal forces acted to pull the labour movement apart just as the American Industrial Revolution was reaching its 'take-off' point.

## 1. The Urban-Industrial Frontier

The first force was the very unevenness of the process of industrialization and proletarianization in an American setting where economic growth occurred not only through a concentric deepening around original nuclei, but also and especially through a succession of sectional developments. The new Western industrial cities (for example, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Chicago after 1850) were built up almost overnight, with little continuity with pre-industrial traditions or social relations.<sup>17</sup> This 'boomtown' characteristic of American industrialization meant that the labour movement in the United States, with the partial exception of New England valleys and the older Eastern port cities, arose without those deep roots in the artisanal resistance to industrialism which many historians have stressed as a determining

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<sup>17</sup> 'In most industrial regions west of the Alleghenies, the town did not precede the factory; the factory made the town' R.H. Tawney, *The American Labour Movement and Other Essays*, London 1979, p. 57.

factor in the formation of militant unionism and working-class consciousness. Moreover it was this expanding urban-industrial frontier—rather than the Turnerian agrarian frontier—with its constantly replenished opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurial accumulation that provided material sustenance for the petty-bourgeois ideologies of individual mobility that gripped the minds of so many American workers. American labourers—to a far greater extent than workers in European industrial nations—could vote with their feet against oppressive working conditions as, all too frequently, geographical mobility became a surrogate for collective action.

## 2. Nativism and the Cultural Division of the US Proletariat

The second centrifugal influence—and decidedly the most disastrous obstacle to labour unity in the 1850s—was the reaction of native workers to the arrival of several million impoverished Irish and German labourers who came in a flood after the European crop failures of the 1840s. These new immigrants provided the cheap labour power for the growth of New England factories as well as the armies of raw muscle for Western railroads and Pennsylvania coalfields. They were met by the universal hostility of a native working class which rioted against them, evicted them from workplaces, refused them admission into trade unions, and tried to exclude them from the franchise.<sup>18</sup> Partly rooted in purely economic rivalries in the labour market (although modern labour historiography has uprooted the hoary old myth that the Irish arrived in New England textile mills as strike-breakers), the Yankee-versus-immigrant polarization in the working class also reflected a profound cultural antagonism that would hinder efforts at labour unity for more than a century. It would be easy to define this cleavage as a persistent opposition between native-Protestant and immigrant-Catholic workers; yet this antinomy does not sufficiently capture the complex nuances of how, on one hand, religion, ethnicity, and popular custom were concatenated into two rival systems—or, on the other hand, how they were integrated into the matrix of a global, and highly distinctive, American bourgeois culture.

Indeed the central paradox of American culture is that while Engels was correct when he labelled it the 'purest bourgeois culture', Marx was equally right when he observed that 'North America is pre-eminently the country of religiosity'.<sup>19</sup> In the absence of a state church or aristocratic hierarchy, secularization was not a requirement for liberalism, and America did not experience the kind of 'cultural revolution' represented by jacobin anticlericalism in Europe. Nor did the American working class develop the traditions of critical, defiant rationalism which on the Continent were so vital in orienting the proletariat toward socialism and in establishing an alliance with the intelligentsia. Instead the industrial revolution in America went hand in hand with

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<sup>18</sup> The immigration of Irish Catholics went back to the late 1820s. By the end of the Jacksonian period there were already attacks on Boston convents and riots between rival Irish and native hand-loom weavers in Philadelphia.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question', *Collected Works*, vol. 3, p. 151.

the reinforcement of religious influences upon popular culture and working-class consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

### Religion and Sub-Cultural Corporatism

Protestantism, for instance, was not merely a majority religion in antebellum America; it was also directly constitutive of popular republican nationalism. As Rhys Issac and others have shown, popular support for the American Revolution was the product of a 'double ideological eruption' as patriotic rebellion against Parliament was legitimated by the rise of a radical evangelicalism that translated the 'rights of man' through the idiom of perfectionist protestantism.<sup>21</sup> This 'First Great Awakening' was followed by a 'Second', in the Jacksonian era, which provided the medium for the incubation of a series of Yankee moral crusades that ultimately converged in the Republican Party of the 1850s (abolitionism, free soil, and anti-popey). On one hand, this revivalism helped forge a more inclusive and homogeneous *Northern* Protestant nationalist identity. On the other hand, the renewal of pietism was a powerful means for establishing the social hegemony of the new industrial capitalists. Religious moralism was the most effective weapon against those arch-enemies of industrial discipline and high profits, 'drunkenness, spontaneous holidays, and inattention to work'.<sup>22</sup> Like the analogous English Methodism, however, evangelical religion could be a two-edged sword, and working men could appropriate its egalitarian side to advocate good, Protestant justifications for trade unionism and the Ten Hour Day. But the salient fact, in any case, is that the evangelistic fires were stoking the pietism of the Yankee working class to a white heat at the very moment when Catholic immigrants began to flood Eastern labour markets (American Catholics multiplied from 663,000 in 1840 to 3,103,000 in 1860).

The Irish immigrants of the famine generation and their successors after 1850 were bringing with them to 'the most militant Protestant nation in the world'<sup>23</sup> a highly distinctive and energetic variant of Catholicism. Many labour historians have characterized the religion of the immigrants as a quintessentially conservative, if not 'feudal' institution, exhibiting the 'deepest continuity with traditions of the

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<sup>20</sup> Moreover the power of religion in America has yet to wane. The US *alone* amongst major industrial nations experienced a powerful resurgence of religion in the post-war period; church affiliation, in fact, has climbed steadily throughout the twentieth century, from 43% in 1910 to 69% in 1960. According to recent surveys there are more than 45,000,000 'born-again' evangelical Protestants and Charismatic Catholics in the US today. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven 1972, pp. 951–952; Also Jeremy Rifkin (with Ted Howard), *The Emerging Order: God in an Age of Scarcity*, New York 1979.

<sup>21</sup> Rhys Issac, 'Preacher and Patriots: Popular Culture and the Revolution in Virginia', in Alfred Young (ed.), *The American Revolution*, DeKalb 1976, p. 130. Also Michael Greenberg, 'Revival, Reform, Revolution: Samuel Davies and the Great Awakening in Virginia', *Marxist Perspectives*, Summer 1980.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, pp. 844–845; Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, pp. 135–137. Also Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860* New York 1938.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, cover note.

peasantry'.<sup>24</sup> But this confuses the ultramontane stance of Continental Catholicism, indissolubly tied to Metternichean reaction and the rear-guard defence of royalty, with the anti-monarchical and pro-republican Catholicism of the Irish lay poor. The fierce religiosity of the Irish immigrants to America was the product of a 'Devotional Revolution' in Ireland that followed in the wake of the defeat of the Revolution of 1789 and was closely associated with Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Emancipation Movement.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the vast majority of Irish immigrants were scarcely peasants in any rigorous sense of the term; rather they were sharecroppers, marginal tenants, agricultural labourers, and seasonal navvies fleeing the genocidal consequences of colonial underdevelopment. Their revived religion was fused with a republican nationalism that had very different political implications from those of Catholic piety in French or Spanish contexts.

The key point is that the American Catholic Church which these Irish immigrants largely created and dominated was, in any comparative estimate, in the van of adaptation to liberal capitalist society. In particular, its symbiotic ties with resurgent Irish Catholicism provided it with the twin traditions of a plebeian (indeed, working-class) clergy (in the 1940s Archbishop Cushing could boast to a CIO meeting that 'not a single Bishop or Archbishop of the American hierarchy was the son of a college graduate')<sup>26</sup> and an openness to democratic ideology via the original fusion of religion and Irish nationalism. Faced with the challenge of the Knights of Labour in the 1880s, it was also the first national Catholic church to undertake an interventionist role in the labour movement, preserving its ideological domination through sponsorship of an anti-radical right wing in the trade unions.<sup>27</sup>

The ingenuity of American Catholicism, already becoming apparent in the 1850s, was that it functioned as an apparatus for acculturating millions of Catholic immigrants to American liberal-capitalist society while simultaneously carving out its own sphere of sub-cultural hegemony through its (eventually) vast system of parochial schools and Catholic (or Catholic-cum-ethnic) associations. This unique historical project embroiled the American Church in concurrent battles both against Vatican intransigents who opposed the rapprochement with 'modernity', as well as with the mainstream of American Protestantism which feared that the Pilgrim heritage was in mortal danger from the twin (and interrelated) evils of 'Rum and Romanism'.

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<sup>24</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises*, New York 1973, p. 167.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850-1875', *American Historical Review*, June 1972; Bruce Francis Biever, S.J., *Religion, Culture and Values*, New York 1976.

<sup>26</sup> Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, p. 1007.

<sup>27</sup> The hegemony of the 'modernist' wing of American Catholicism has only been secured through constant internal struggle, and it would be mistaken to underestimate the power of the conservative hierarchy at any particular point in its history. Nevertheless, the adaptive 'Americanizers' have been the real pioneers of the Church's social and political insertion into American life. Occasionally they have also been the catalyst of change in the broader world church as well. Thus the battle of Cardinal Gibbons and the Americanists against church reactionaries over the question of the Knights of Labor paved the way for the 1891 *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII which brought a 'truce' between the Vatican and the liberal and labour movements. In this sense 'christian democracy' was born in the United States. Cf. Henry J. Browne, *The Catholic Church and the Knights of Labor*, Washington D.C., 1949.

The important precision, therefore, is that it was not just immigration, nor even Catholic immigration, *per se* that was breaking down the cultural homogeneity of the Northern working class; but rather, from the late 1840s onward, the formation of *two corporatist sub-cultures* organized along a religious divide and operating through an enormous array of institutions and movements (ranging from the Womens' Christian Temperance Union to the Knights of Columbus). Furthermore each of these great cultural-religious blocs encompassed a myriad of ethnic, denominational, and sectional sub-alignments which, in turn, possessed their own spheres of relative autonomy.<sup>28</sup> The radical differences between the social and cultural universes of American and most Western European workers was not the presence of ethnic or religious division, but the manner in which a multiplicity of these differences was aggregated and counterposed on a national level across a single ethno-cultural axis. The institutional complexes of 'Protestant Nativism' and 'Catholicism' operated a complex mediation between ethnic and linguistic particularisms on one level, and the general framework of national bourgeois culture on another.<sup>29</sup> While they were in some sense parallel agents of *acculturation* (Catholic schools imparted American nationalism and respect for property just as effectively as Protestant-dominated public schools), they were also antagonistic structures of *assimilation* (ethnic groups tended to form alliances on denominational lines, ethnic exogamy remain religiously endogamous, etc.).

Cultural division was reproduced on a political plane in the 1850s. The restructuring of the party system that took place after 1854 reflected both the increasing sectional polarization *and* the new widening of ethno-religious cleavages in the working class. Thus working class nativism contributed to the formation of the virulently anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant 'American' or 'Know-Nothing' Party which temporarily became one of the most successful third-party movements in American history. By the middle of the decade the majority of the Know-Nothings fused with the Free Soil Party and a wing of the disintegrating Whig Party to form the new Republican Party. The rise of the Republicans clearly represented the triumph of the most aggressive Yankee small-capitalist strata, and the party's programme was a compelling synthesis of Protestant moralism, centralizing nationalism, and idealized entrepreneurial capitalism. Ironically, the Republican battle cry of 'free labour' had nothing to do with the rights of collective labour, but

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<sup>28</sup> Ethnicity in America is, of course, as Glazer and Moynihan have emphasized, 'a new social form' not merely a 'survival from the age of mass immigration'. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Cambridge, (Mass.) 1963, p. 16. I would add, moreover, that to understand how specific ethnicities cohere and are reproduced it is essential to refer to the overall balance of class, religious, ethnic, and racial alignment. Thus in reaction to the immigration of Irish Catholics, Irish Protestants quickly became 'Scotch-Irish'. Later diverse communities of Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Slovaks, Poles, and Magyars—forced to band together against discrimination and exploitation—accepted a certain ethnic commonality as 'hunkies' despite their traditional divisions and antagonisms. Cf. Josef J. Barton, *Peasants and Strangers*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1975, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> For some political historians, however, the most relevant antinomies are 'pietist' versus 'liturgist' as German high-church Lutherans in the Midwest tended to bloc with Irish and German Catholics against temperance and in support of parochial education. Cf. Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System*, p. 363.

rather evoked the dream of escape from wage labour through individual mobility.<sup>30</sup>

The Catholic immigrants, in reaction, were driven into the Democratic Party, which offered a *laissez-faire* toleration of religious and cultural difference. The ensuing political split in the working class endured until the eve of the New Deal, and its consequences were devastating for the development of class consciousness. On one hand, native Protestant workers rallied to the leadership of their own bosses and exploiters, while the Catholic immigrants forged an unholy alliance with Southern reaction.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Racism: The Unifying Theme

This account of the working class in the 1850's would be incomplete without discussing a third divisive force: racism. American democracy was, after all, the most spectacularly successful case of settler-colonialism and the correlative condition for 'free soil, free labour' was the genocidal removal of the indigenous population. Moreover, as Tocqueville observed, the antebellum North was, if anything, more poisonously anti-black than the South.

An already consolidated white racism tied to the myth of a future black flooding of Northern labour markets led most native workmen to oppose social equality and suffrage for black freedmen. From Boston to Cincinnati, the white lower classes periodically rioted, attacked communities of freedmen, hounded abolitionists, and imposed colour bars on their crafts. Northern blacks were everywhere excluded from the universalization of manhood suffrage in the 1820s and 1830s, and on the eve of the Civil War only four states in the Union allowed freedmen even a qualified franchise.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore the rise of the Republican Party and massive Northern opposition to the *extension* of

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, New York 1970.

<sup>31</sup> In his well known study of Lynn, Massachusetts as a 'microcosm' of the industrial revolution in the USA, Alan Dawley has de-emphasized ethno-religious divisions in the working class as a cause of the defeat of class consciousness in the 1850s. Instead he has argued that it was the 'timing of events'—specifically the nationalistic impact of the Civil War in the context of a profound commitment to democratic suffrage—which was responsible for the political incorporation of the native working class within the Republican party. Yet Lynn, as Dawley admits, was highly atypical, with 'a larger proportion of native-born workers than nearly every other major manufacturing centre in the state'. Had Dawley chosen other 'microcosms', he might have drawn different conclusions; as has Susan Hirsch, for instance, in her study of how ethno-religious conflicts in antebellum Newark brought the social order to 'ruins' in the 1850s and fatally split craftsmen into competing 'ethnic ghettos'. Dawley, *Class and Community*, pp. 238–239; and with Paul Faler, 'Working-class Culture and Politics in the Industrial Revolution: Sources of Loyalty and Rebellion', in Milton Cantor, ed., *American Working Class Culture*, Westport 1979, pp. 70–71; Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class*, pp. 106–107, 120–123.

<sup>32</sup> At the outbreak of the Civil War only four states permitted Negroes to vote—New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York; and only in New York did they constitute as much as one per cent of the population. There were 149 Negroes in New Hampshire; 194 in Vermont. In practice few could vote in Massachusetts, because of the literary test, or in New York, because of a property qualification applicable only to Negroes. Sait, *American Parties and Elections*, p. 42.

slavery contributed little to changing these prejudices. The young Republican Party carefully skirted or openly opposed the integration of blacks into Northern society; deportation to Africa, in fact, was the favourite solution. Although segments of the native white working class, especially in New England, eventually embraced abolitionism, they remained a minority whose opposition to slavery was most often framed within a pietistic religious ideology, rather than within a clear political analysis of the relationship between capitalism and slavery. Unfortunately more articulate and widely heard voices in the working class were those of 'labour leaders' and disgruntled Jacksonian radicals like Orestes Brownson or George H. Evans, who, in the guise of class politics, advocated an alliance of Northern labour with the slaveowners against 'capital'.

Amongst the immigrant proletariat, on the other hand, a section of the German workers possessed a more or less revolutionary understanding of the political implications of the slavery crisis for the future of American labour. They attempted to mobilize support for abolitionism, and denounced the efforts of pro-slavery demagogues like Herman Kriege and the *New York Staats-Zeitung*. But these 'Red 48s'—including the vanguard 'Communist Club' of New York—were ghettoized by language and their lack of understanding of the culture of American labour. Their heroic efforts had little impact upon the mainstream of the labour movement.

### The Good Citizens of Pennsylvania

As for the Irish (already the bulk of the unskilled working class), in the 1840s William Lloyd Garrison had originated a bold strategy for building an alliance between Abolitionism and the contemporary movement in Ireland for repeal of the anti-Catholic laws. Unlike other Abolitionists, Garrison had sincere sympathies with the Irish and believed that the immigrant supporters of Daniel O'Connell in America could be rallied to a mutually beneficial united front. In response to solicitations from Garrison, the 'Great Liberator' (as O'Connell was popularly known) issued a series of ringing appeals for Irish solidarity with abolitionism: 'I want no American aid if it comes across the Atlantic stained in Negro blood'; 'Over the broad Atlantic I put forth my voice saying—Come out of such a land, you Irishmen, or if you remain, and dare countenance the system of slavery . . . we will recognize you as Irishmen no longer'.<sup>33</sup>

O'Connell received a torrent of angry replies from American Repealers decrying his support for blacks. One letter came from an assembly of Irish miners in Pennsylvania. After denouncing his address as a 'fabrication' and warning that they would never accept blacks as 'brethren', the miners added: 'We do not form a distinct class of the community, but consider ourselves in every respect as CITIZENS of this great and glorious REPUBLIC—that we look upon every attempt to address us, otherwise than as CITIZENS, upon the subject of the abolition

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<sup>33</sup> Gilbert Osofsky, 'Abolitionists, Irish Immigrants and the Dilemmas of Romantic Nationalism', *American Historical Review*, October 1975, p. 905.

of slavery, or any subject whatsoever, as base and iniquitous, no matter from what quarter it may proceed.<sup>34</sup> The refusal of Irish miners in an anthracite hell-hole of eastern Pennsylvania not only to sympathize with the slaves, but to accept the implication—even from their own national hero—that they were in America anything less than ‘CITIZENS’, speaks volumes about the ideological impact of American ‘exceptionalism’ and the difficulties of building a class-conscious labour movement.

Thus, despite Garrison’s and O’Connell’s combined efforts, abolitionism failed utterly to stir the most exploited and outcast strata of the Northern working class. Although the Irish stood loyally by the Union in the Civil War (few as Republicans, most as ‘Union Democrats’), anti-black racism grew as the rising cost of living combined with a class-biased conscription system to further increase the miseries of the immigrant ghettos and fuel the distorted perception that ‘the blacks were to blame’. The great Draft Riot of 1863—the bloodiest civil disturbance in American history—exhibited the schizophrenic consciousness of the immigrant poor: their hatred of the silk-stocking rich and their equal resentment against blacks. Although attempts have been made to rationalize the sadistic attacks by the Irish on freedmen as the consequences of a desperate rivalry for unskilled jobs between the two groups, this analysis has lost ground in the face of growing evidence that blacks had already been excluded from most categories of manual labour and that the competitive ‘threat’ was totally one-sided—directed in fact *against* blacks.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the racism of the Irish must be seen instead as part and parcel of their rapid and defensive ‘Americanization’ in a social context where each corporatist class culture (native-Protestant versus immigrant-Catholic) faithfully reflected through the prism of its own particular values the unifying settler-colonial credo that made them all ‘CITIZENS’.

### Labour and Populism

The economic crisis at the beginning of the Civil War, and the employer offensive that accompanied it, undermined most of the remaining trade unions. But when a new unionism emerged at the end of the war, the basis for common action between native and immigrant had been strengthened by their shared experiences and sacrifices on the battlefield. Somewhere between 500,000 and 750,000 workers, almost a quarter of the male proletariat, fought for the Union; given the discriminatory draft system, a disproportionate share were Irish and German immigrants. Moreover in the industrial boom that began in 1863 and lasted until 1873, many immigrant workers began to move out of the unskilled job ghetto in which they had been previously confined and into the construction crafts, metal trades, and other skilled sectors. At the same time new winds of revolution from Ireland

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 902.

<sup>35</sup> ‘The old advocations, by which coloured men obtained a livelihood, are rapidly unceasingly and inevitably passing into other hands; every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived immigrant, whose hunger and whose colour are thought to give him a better title to place; and so we believe it will continue until the last prop is levelled beneath us’ *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, March 4, 1853.

(the 1867 Fenian rising, the 1879–82 Land War) and Germany (Lasallism and the struggle for suffrage) were politicizing immigrant workmen in a more radical direction. Although violent echoes of antebellum ethno-religious conflict were still heard after Appomattox (New York's 'Orange Riots' of 1869 and 1870, the bloody feuding between 'Hibernians' and British miners in the Pennsylvania coalfields), the basic trend of the labour struggles in the postbellum generation was the growing unity of the working class at the workplace and its search for more effective forms of solidarity and trade union organization.

### The Strike Waves of the Late Nineteenth Century

The Gilded Age opened an era of full-scale industrialization centred on the consolidation of a continental internal market and the growing mechanization of the capital-goods sector of the economy. The expansion of Western agriculture and railroads created an enormous appetite for machinery and iron products which was fed by the rise of a vast new industrial complex around the Great Lakes. By the end of Reconstruction, Chicago had surpassed Manchester as the world's greatest manufacturing metropolis while the American working class had almost doubled in size. Yet mass-production industries were still in their infancy and only a handful of factories employed more than a thousand workers. The railways were thus unique by virtue of their giant corporate size, financial resources, and enormous workforces. The railway working class, one million strong by the end of the century and alone possessing the capacity for coordinated national strikes, emerged as the 'social vanguard' of the entire American proletariat. It was no accident that the class struggles of each decennial business cycle between 1870 and 1900 culminated in national railway strikes supported by the riotous solidarity of hundreds of thousands, even millions of other workers and sympathetic small farmers. The Great Rebellion of 1877, the massive Gould system strikes of 1885 and 1886, and the epic Pullman Strike (or 'Debs Rebellion') of 1894: these were the flash-points of class struggle in late-nineteenth-century America.

Each of these strike waves reinforced attempts to build more broadly inclusive national labour organizations. As early as 1867, with the formation of the shortlived National Labor Union, the concept of a united workers' federation integrating both native and foreign-stock labourers had begun to win mass support. During the 1877 railroad strikes a previously clandestine and little-known movement—patterned after free-masonry to shield it from employer repression—called the 'Knights of Labor' emerged to lead struggles in a number of states. In 1885, striking Knights on the southwestern railroads defeated Jay Gould, the most powerful and wily robber baron of his day. As a result, unorganized workers everywhere turned toward the Order, whose membership grew to more than 700,000 in 1886. At the same time many unions began to affiliate; while of the remainder, the most important—including the crucial railway brotherhoods—were rapidly being pressed toward merger by rank-and-file sentiment. In a period when even the most skilled craftsmen had great difficulty maintaining union organization in the face of employer hostility and state violence,

it was widely accepted that only a vast, inclusive movement of the entire proletariat would constitute a sufficiently powerful framework of solidarity and mutual aid to allow component unions to grow and survive. The flexible structure of the Knights provided for this aid by developing a broad range of organizational forms, based on craft (National Trades Assemblies), industry (Special Assemblies) or locality (District Assemblies).

### The Social Vision of the Knights

Beyond the mere economic organization of the toiling classes, however, the Knights aspired to a more profound vision. They tapped the well-springs of diverse labouring traditions (fraternalism, evangelicalism, 'equal rights', and mutualism) to nourish a network of solidary association which bound together workplace and community. A typical inventory of Knights-related organizations (in this case, Detroit 1885) would include: 'unions, Knights of Labor assemblies, Working-men's Club Rooms, cooperative stores and factories, labour newspapers, singing societies, social clubs, political organizations, and a workers' militia (!)'.<sup>36</sup> But the invention that most clearly testified to the Knight's project of forging a *parallel proletarian civil society* was the Knights of Labor 'Court'. In his fundamental work on the Order's membership and internal organization, Garlock provides a description of this astonishing institution: 'Each Local Assembly had its own court whose officers were elected by the membership, in which Knights settled differences without recourse to the civil courts. Members charged one another not only with such violations of obligation to the Order as scabbing or accepting substandard wages, but for such violations of domestic obligation as wife-beating and desertion, for such violations of standards of social conduct as public intoxication or the failure to pay boarding bills'.<sup>37</sup> The embryonic class culture represented by the Knights not only transcended a 'pure and simple' trade union economism, but also provided the first alternative to dominant ethno-religious sub-cultures.<sup>38</sup> It has been estimated that at one time or another 100,000 to 200,000 individuals served as officers in Knights courts or local assemblies; any sampling of names reveals the landmark reconciliation of Irish, German, and native workers that the Order had achieved. The Knights also made the first serious effort to organize the female proletariat—appointing a full-time woman organizer—and a pioneer, though faltering attempt at integrating black labourers.<sup>39</sup> Thus to the enthusiastic Frederick Engels the rise of the Knights could be interpreted as nothing less than the American working class's first clear step towards becoming a 'class-for-itself': 'the first national organization created by the American working class

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<sup>36</sup> Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation*, p. 123.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Garlock, 'A Structural Analysis of the Knights of Labor: A Prolegomenon to the History of the Producing Classes', University of Rochester, PhD Thesis, 1974, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> The unity of the Knights of Labor was all the more significant in face of the powerful resurgence of anti-Catholicism in the 1880s as pietism responded to the surging Catholic birth-rate and the expansion of the parochial school system. Cf. Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System*, pp. 216–221.

<sup>39</sup> Garlock, *A Structural Analysis*, p. 21.

as a whole . . . the only national bond that holds them together, that makes their strength felt to themselves no less than to their enemies'.<sup>40</sup>

The gospel of labour solidarity assumed a millenarian quality in the railway strikes and eight-hour-day demonstrations of 1886 as combined Knights and trade union membership reached a nineteenth century height. The world's first May Day touched off a spontaneous, month-long wave of mass marches, walk-outs, and quasi-general strikes which culminated in nationwide violence as newspaper headlines asked: 'THE REVOLUTION?'. In the wake of the defeat of the third anti-Gould strike, however, and of the repression that followed the Haymarket Massacre, the dizzy growth of the Knights was brought to a sudden halt, and, in an atmosphere of worsening relations with the unions and internal vituperations against the Powderly leadership, the Order began its long slide toward oblivion. The consequent fragmentation of the labour movement also undermined the survival of the various local 'labour parties' that flourished in the brief climax of Knights' power and working-class unity in 1885–86.

### The Knights' Decline

The causes of the Knights' decline and the erosion of their cultural and political networks have long been an occasion of historiographic controversy;<sup>41</sup> and without directly entering the lists, it is worthwhile to examine several factors which would persistently appear in later conjunctures as obstacles to unitarian class organization and consciousness.

The Knights' power on the railways, for example, was undermined by the defection of the Engineers whose brotherhood was bribed and pampered by railway barons grown keenly aware of the unique power of this group of workers to shut down the entire economy. After 1885 the Engineers, under the right-wing suzerainty of Grandmaster Arthur, never again officially struck or came to the aid of fellow railway workers. The desertion of the Engineers' Brotherhood presaged the growth within the labour movement of a counter-trend towards a narrow and 'aristocratic' conception of organization.

Another problem illuminated by the crisis of the Knights was a developing symbiosis between labour leadership and the patronage machinery of the Democratic Party. The Knights' archives reveal

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<sup>40</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'The Labour Movement in America', American Preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Moscow 1977, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> The historiographic battlelines run roughly as follows: Those groomed in the 'Wisconsin' tradition of Commons and Perlman with its almost teleological conviction that Gompersism was the natural destiny of American labour have tended to view the Knights as an impossible dream—the last hurrah of an old 'utopian' reform tradition that clung to a classless ideology of 'producerism' and to the advocacy of petty-bourgeois panaceas like cheap money (Greenbackism) and producer cooperatives. Other scholars, including Marxists like Foner as well as the most recent generation of Knights' historians (Garlock, Oestreicher, etc.), have argued a contrasting view of the Order; agreeing, it is true, that the Knights were burdened by ideological dead weight, but emphasizing as Engels did that the far more important dimension of the movement was its profound impulse toward a class, rather than merely craft, solidarity.

scores of rank-and-file protests against the manipulation of the Order to bolster individual political careers. Master Workman Powderly, Democratic Mayor of Scranton (Pa.) and later (Republican-appointed) Commissioner of Immigration, was only the most famous of many examples. Indeed, David Montgomery, contrasting British and American conditions, has suggested that the 'most effective deterrent' in this period to the maturation of class consciousness and the creation of a labour party was precisely 'the ease with which American working men entered elected office'.<sup>42</sup> The cooptation of individual labour leaders was facilitated by the revolution in American city government that occurred in the 1880s as an aspirant petty bourgeois of Irish—and occasionally German—extraction began to take municipal power from old 'brahmin' elites. Beginning with the victories of Irish mayoral candidates in New York (1880) and Boston (1884), the new politicians generalized a Tammany Hall model of political brokerage based on a captive Catholic working-class vote.<sup>43</sup> Local trade union leaders—especially in the Irish-dominated building trades—were often key links in cementing machine control and principal beneficiaries of political sinecures. The overall effect of this 'spoils system' was to corrupt labour leadership, substitute paternalism for worker self-reliance, and, through the formation of ethnic patronage monopolies, keep the poorer strata of the working class permanently divided. Finally it is important to recognize that this tendency towards the assimilation of labour leadership by local political regimes preceded by almost a generation the precipitation of a significant trade union bureaucracy *per se* (this would only develop on a broad scale with the rise of full-time 'walking delegates' and business agents after 1900).

### New Perspectives: the AFL and the Farmers' Alliance

It would be mistaken, moreover, to see the collapse of the Knights after 1887 as the end of the wave of postbellum labour militancy. Indeed in the early 1890s the incipient trends toward the crystallization of a craft aristocracy within the working class and a bureaucracy within the trade unions were outstripped by the apparent radicalization of key sectors of labour. With the decline of the Knights much of the fighting energy mobilized in the eighties was simply transferred to the two new movements that claimed to provide more effective frameworks for labour solidarity. On the one hand, the American Railroad Union under the leadership of Eugene Debs expressed the continuing desire of the railway workers for an inclusive, all-grades organization. A prototype industrial union, it was widely welcomed as labour's most

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<sup>42</sup> David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, New York 1967, pp. 215 and 208–209.

<sup>43</sup> In explaining the decline of the previously militant labour movement in Troy, New York, Daniel Walkowitz attributes special importance to the rise of an Irish middle class that gradually expropriated the community leadership previously exercised by the well-organized and articulate iron moulders. 'Instead of the few petit bourgeois Irish shopkeepers . . . who were traditionally men of the worker community, a new middle class had emerged which consisted of professionals and entrepreneurs, or men of commerce. The latter's domination of the Democratic party, and their continued involvement with the workers in French-Canadian and Irish ethnic clubs and nationalist movements, began to diminish the working class base within the ethnic community and to shift ethnic allegiances to an inter-class axis.' Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town*, Urbana 1978, p. 260.

advanced response to the challenge of the 'trusts'. The American Federation of Labor, on the other hand, was still far from the conservative monolith of business unionism that it would one day become. The child of the historic agitation for the eight hour day in 1886, the early AFL was seen by its founders, many of them avowed socialists, as a more homogeneously proletarian organization than the Knights. At the time of Grover Cleveland's re-election in 1892, the AFL was still an embryonic coalition of national unions (including the Industrial Mineworkers), state federations, municipal trades councils, and independent locals. Its future structure and politics remained to be resolved by the conflict of ideological currents within it, including a rapidly growing socialist faction.

It was the Great Depression of 1893–96—the worst collapse of the nineteenth century—that forced the issue of the labour movement's political identity and sounded the depths of its internal unity and cohesion. The fighting will and consciousness of a whole generation of labour militants, matured over the long cycle of struggles and movements since 1877, was tested in the series of violent battles that culminated in the American Railroad Union's boycott of the Pullman Company in 1894. What was so remarkable about the Pullman Strike, distinguishing it as one of the three or four most climatic labour battles in American history,<sup>44</sup> was not only its escalation into a national confrontation between hundreds of thousands of workers and the federal government—this had also occurred in 1877—but, rather, its unprecedented conjunction with massive upsurges of native agrarian radicalism and international labour politics.

The birth of the Farmers' Alliance in the late eighties, in a period of falling crop prices and rising rents, had signalled a radicalization of agrarian protest in the United States. Whereas previous farmer movements, such as the various 'farmer parties' of the 1870s or the national Grange, had tended to represent the interests of more prosperous farmers, the Alliance derived an almost millenarian energy from its roots in the poorer strata of the rural population. Especially in the Southern cotton belt where the ancien regime had been recast into the debt servitude of the crop-lien system, the Alliance by its unprecedented feat of uniting black and white tenants had become a subversive force of revolutionary potential. Furthermore, in areas of the South and the Southwest an active cooperation had long existed between trade unions, local assemblies of the Knights and the Alliance. (A frequently overlooked fact was the dynamism of Southern trade unionism in the late eighties; New Orleans, in particular, had a powerful inter-racial trade union movement that made it a labour citadel by 1890.<sup>45</sup>)

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<sup>44</sup> The other watershed labour battles were the 1919 Steel Strike, whose defeat paved the way for the collapse of trade unionism in the 1920s, and the 1936–1937 General Motors Sitdown Strike which secured the first CIO beachhead in the mass production industries.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. David Paul Bennetts, 'Black and White Workers: New Orleans, 1880–1900,' University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana) PhD Thesis, 1972; and Melton McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South*, Westport 1978.

## The Rise of Labour Populism

After the dramatic entry of the Alliance into politics in 1892 as the Peoples' Party, grass-roots pressure began to build for a national farmer-labour coalition similar to what already existed in the Southwest. Labour Populism seemed to offer the unifying strategic vision and breadth of alliance that had been missing in the ephemeral labour parties that had briefly flourished in New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee in the aftermath of Haymarket and the 1885–86 strike wave. At the same time, Labour Populism seemed the natural American counterpart to the new working-class parties then emerging in Europe and Australia. The contemporary labour press reveals the keen interest with which American trade unionists followed the rise of European social democracy and Anglo-Australian labourism. Although German-American workmen were naturally most electrified by the successes of the SPD, it was the model of the Australian labour parties and the British Independent Labour Party that stirred the greatest excitement in the ranks of the AFL.

The Australian parties—the first *trade union* rather than socialist political parties in the world—were a direct outgrowth of the great Maritime and Queensland shearers' strikes of 1890–91. Although craft unionists had been the first to seek political representation, it was the impetus of the new, mass unions of pastoral workers, dockers, and miners—reacting to economic depression and government repression—that ruptured the bourgeois domination of the political arena and gave the new parties their initial strength. Similarly in Britain, Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party (whose influence was generally exaggerated by its Yankee enthusiasts) was particularly oriented to the New Unions, which were most vulnerable to the increasing attacks on trade union rights by the courts and House of Lords. It was, therefore, not surprising that it was a coalition of socialists and industrial unionists (especially the fledgling United Mine Workers) who lobbied within the AFL for independent labour political action as a riposte to government strike-breaking. At the 1893 AFL convention, they succeeded in winning majority support for an eleven-point political programme copied from the platform of the British ILP (including a famous 'plank ten' which called for 'collectivization of industry'). The convention forwarded the programme to constituent unions for membership ratification.

At the same time, Chicago emerged as the national centre of the experiment of uniting Populism and the new labour radicalism. Even before the depression, police persecution and municipal corruption had revived Chicago labour's interest in independent politics. Then, in the face, first of government suppression to the 1894 Coal Strike, immediately followed by federal intervention against the Pullman strikers, the current of interest broadened into a mass movement. The embattled national miners' and railroad unions together with the Knights of Labor endorsed the Populists, while at a tumultuous conference in Springfield called by the Illinois Federation of Labour, a broad spectrum of unionists, insurgent farmers, and middle-class radicals met to consider the formation of a state-wide People's Party.

Against the dramatic background of Deb's imprisonment and the crushing of the Pullman Strike, the delegates unified around a Populist banner and on the basis of an amended version of the eleven point ILP platform. The key architect of farmer-labour unity at Springfield was the famous muck-racker and Fabian socialist, Henry Demarest Lloyd, whose avowed strategy was to make Illinois Labour-Populism the 'spearhead of the movement to transform the Peoples' party into the American counterpart of the ILP'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, spurred by the tireless efforts of local socialists, trade unions throughout the neighbouring states of Wisconsin and Minnesota also joined the Populist crusade while simultaneously ratifying the proposed eleven points for the AFL. Lloyd was so sure that the momentum towards Labour-Populism was growing invincible that he asked Gompers to call a national conference to form a united front for the fall elections.

Gompers, on the other hand, was equally determined to defeat the socialist challenge within the AFL and to 'restrict and terminate the alliance between organized labour and Populism'.<sup>47</sup> His allies included not only the more conservative craft unions, but also the right wing of the populist party. By 1894 a more conservative and anti-labour bloc of wealthier farmers from the Great Plains states ('a shadow movement imitative of populism but without organic roots in the Alliance network and its political culture') was beginning to displace the leadership of the radical Southern and Southwestern Alliance men.<sup>48</sup> With the financial resources of the silver interests (the 'American Bi-Metallic League) behind them, the Midwesterners hoped first to reduce the populist programme to the single issue of free silver, and then to manoeuvre a fusion with the silverite wing of the Democratic Party. Their distaste for the radical Labour-Populism represented by the Springfield platform coincided with Gompers's.

### The Debacle of the Nineties

The defeat of Labour-Populism was a tragi-comedy in several acts. First, at the 1894 Denver convention of the AFL, Gompers, supported by the conservative building trades, succeeded in preventing adoption of the ILP programme, despite evidence of its endorsement by a majority of the rank and file. The AFL's repudiation of the eleven points then provided a perfect excuse for moderate agrarians and corrupt 'machine' trade unionists in Illinois to foment a split with the Populist left wing. Many of the disillusioned socialists, in turn, followed Daniel De Leon's sectarian advice and returned to the isolated advocacy of 'chemically pure' revolutionary programmes. Finally, after a bitterly contested battle between the Midwestern and Southern wings of the Populist Party in July, 1896, the progressive Omaha Platform (with its several pro-labour planks) was scrapped for the sake of free silver quackery and fusion with the Democrats. The subsequent presidential

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<sup>46</sup> Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism: 1865-1901*, New London 1946, p. 213.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 183; also J.F. Finn, 'AF of L Leaders and the Question of Politics in the Early 1890s', *American Studies*, 7, 3.

<sup>48</sup> David Montgomery, 'On Goodwyn's Populists', *Marxist Perspectives*, Spring 1978, p. 169.

election—which a year or two before had promised to be the dawn of a new era of farmer-labour political independence—demolished all third-party hopes and ushered in, instead, a generation of Republican-big business hegemony over national politics.

Underlying the debacle of 1896, however, was more than simply the successful conspiracies of Gompers and the conservative Populists to derail a radical farmer-labour coalition. Even when full allowance is made for the demoralization and confusion created by the infighting within the AFL and the Populist party, a great discrepancy remains between the radicalism of the veteran trade union militants—Debs, McBride, Morgan, etc.—and the apparent apathy or indifference of the majority of the urban and still predominantly unorganized working class. Despite the fact that Chicago in the midst of the depression was frequently described by contemporary observers as a city ‘trembling on the brink of revolution’, the Labour-Populists won only about 20% of the potential labour vote (40,000 out of 230,000) at the height of their influence in 1894 in the wake of the Pullman Strike. Moreover, in a pattern of regional exceptionalism that would be mirrored again in the twentieth century, the movement for an independent labour politics failed to grow in the other major urban-industrial centres outside of the Chicago-Northwestern area.

Were there not, therefore, other, more profound forces acting to disrupt the advance of Labour-Populism and to deflect the development of American labour from the path traced by British and Australian labour parties?

### **The Racist-Nativist Backlash**

Two factors stand out most clearly. First, the united rebellion of the Southern yeomen and farm tenants—the cutting edge of agrarian radicalism—was broken up by a violent counter-attack of the regional ruling class which counterposed ‘Jim Crow’ and redneck demagogism to the Farmers’ Alliance and inter-racial cooperation. A vicious panoply of black disenfranchisement, racial segregation, and lynch terror was installed in the nineties to suppress militant black tenants, to keep them tied to the land, and to prevent their future collaboration with poor whites. At the same time the defeat of the great New Orleans General Strike of 1892 destroyed the vanguard of Southern labour and wrecked inter-racial unity between workers. Out of its ashes arose a stunted, Jim Crow white unionism on one hand, and a pariah black sub-proletariat on the other.<sup>49</sup> These twin defeats of Southern tenants and workers were decisive in allowing merchant-planter reaction to block the development of a free labour market, and in freezing the Southern economy for more than half a century in the disastrous mould of a servile cotton monoculture.

Secondly, this Southern counter-revolution was paralleled north of the Mason-Dixon Line by a resurgence of nativism and ethno-religious conflict within the industrial working class. In the bleak depression

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<sup>49</sup> Bennetts, ‘Black and White Workers’, pp. 554–55.

days of the mid-nineties, many native as well as 'old' immigrant workers came to believe that burgeoning immigration was creating a grave competitive threat. (Symbolically, 1896 was the first year that Eastern and Southern European immigration exceeded that from Northwestern Europe.) Simultaneously, in response to the political successes of Irish Democrats in the elections of 1890 and 1892, there was a resurgence of the militant anti-Catholicism led by the American Protective Association (a predominantly Scotch-Irish group that blamed the collusion on the 'flood of immigrants unloosed on America by papal agents') and the 150,000-member United American Mechanics.<sup>50</sup> Fatally for the hopes of labour radicals, anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic prejudice rent the unity of even those industrial unions, the miners and the railway workers, who were ostensibly the bed rock of the new Labour-Populism: 'Protestants were warned to avoid all unions dominated by papists, to discard the strike as a useless device, and to place no confidence in free silver. This advice made so strong an impression that Eugene Debs, the militant labour leader, and Ignatious Donnelly, the fiery Populist, called the APA an instrument designed by the railroad magnates to disorganize labour unions. In fact, APA-ism did have a disruptive impact on unionism, and not only among railroad employees. In the coalfields of Pennsylvania and Illinois this internecine strife checked a UMW organizing drive; in many cases it tore existing locals apart.'<sup>51</sup>

The populist movement itself did little to allay the fears of the immigrant proletariat or to arrest the increasing polarization within the ranks of the 'producing classes'. Its cultural style was definitely evangelical while its strong affinities for prohibitionism and state education reproduced classic nativist motifs. This may partially explain why so many foreign-born workers in the Midwest spurned Labour-Populism at the very moment when they were moving away from the party of Cleveland and 'hard times'. Although the Republicans (briefly in 1896 the *less* nativist of the two parties) ultimately captured an important segment of this alienated Catholic working-class vote, an even larger part retreated from electoral participation entirely. The election of 1896 thus marks a profound mutation in American political culture. At a time when the European proletariat was becoming more politically engaged than ever before, the American working class was undergoing a striking electoral *demobilization* as a result of the nativist backlash (particularly the agrarian capture of the Democratic Party) and of new restrictions on the popular suffrage (black disenfranchisement, poll taxes, and residency requirements). This combined process of exclusion/abstention dispersed the working-class vote while simultaneously creating a huge 'gap'—absent proletarian voters whom every third party movement of the twentieth century would seek to identify and mobilize.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, New York 1974, p. 81.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> 'The large decline in participation after 1900 and the exceptional working-class abstention rate today very much resemble a gap in the active American electorate that was filled elsewhere by socialist parties.' Walter Dean Burnham, 'The Politics of Heterogeneity', p. 679.

Finally it must be noted that the renaissance of ethno-religious and racial conflict at the end of the nineteenth century was intimately connected with a far-reaching transmutation of popular ideologies. In the face of the race terror in Dixie and the demands of US expansionism in the Caribbean and the Pacific, the old popular nationalism framed by Lincolnian Unionism was being remoulded into an xenophobic creed of 'Anglo-Saxon Americanism' based on social darwinism and 'scientific racism'.<sup>53</sup> The coincidence of this ideological torsion within popular culture with the second major recomposition of the American working class, fed by the new immigration, provides a context for understanding the increasing rightward shift of the AFL after 1896 towards Jim Crow unions, immigration restriction, and narrow craft exclusivism. Although trade unionism for the first time survived a serious depression, the later nineties were reminiscent of the 1850s, by reason of the intensity of the working-class dissension and fragmentation as Protestant was again mobilized against Catholic, white against black, and native against immigrant.

## The Failure of Debsian Socialism

### 1. The Splintered World of Labour

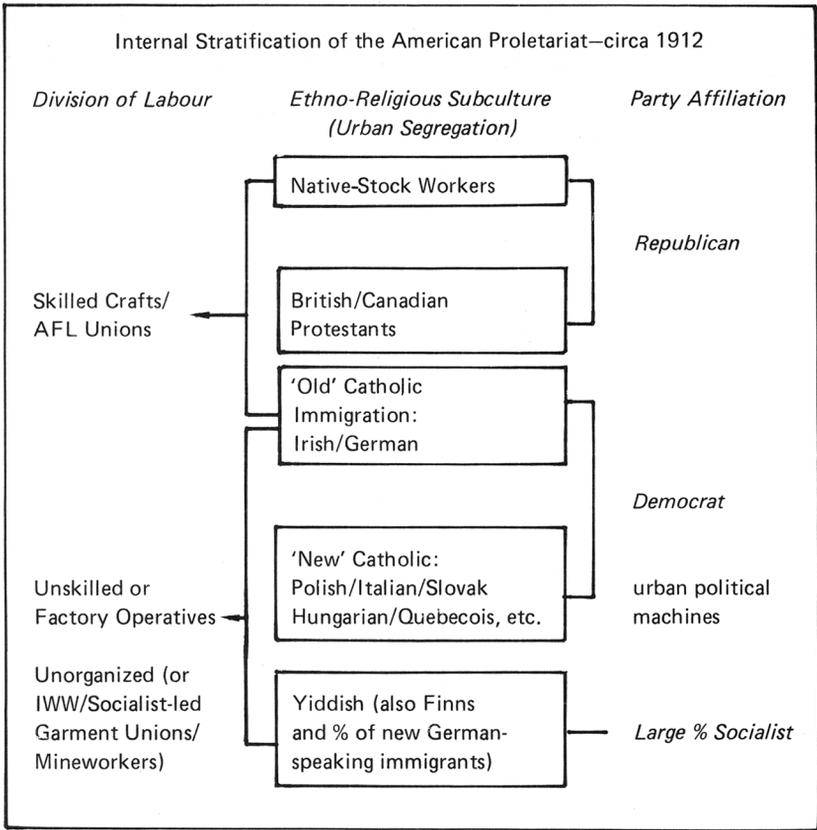
The new immigration, like the old, provided super-exploited gang labour for extractive industries, domestic service, and construction. It also provided on a rapidly expanding scale the armies of machine operatives and semi-skilled labourers required by the dramatic growth, from 1898 onwards, of the trustified mass-production industries. By 1914, when Henry Ford began to create his 'brave new world' of assembly production at his Highland Park (Michigan) Model-T plant, the majority of this enlarged proletariat were foreign-born workers, more often than not politically disenfranchised and segregated—by poverty or deliberate discrimination—into slum areas apart from the native working class. The new coalescence of ethnicity, religion and skill produced the differentiated hierarchy depicted below (p. 34).

The origins of this hierarchy require some comment. In the first place it is important to challenge the common assertion that immigration *per se*—'hordes of peasants'—created an unmeltable and culturally backward heterogeneity that made class unity impossible.<sup>54</sup> Indeed the new immigrants brought a vast array of parochial kin and village identifications with them from the old country. But the *conscious decision* to forge larger ethnic solidarities as the basis for communal organization in America was most often a defensive reaction to exclusion and victimization in the new country. In other words, class and ethnicity

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<sup>53</sup> 'Never have patriotism, imperialism, and the religion of American Protestants stood in such fervent coalescence as during the McKinley-Roosevelt era.' Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, p. 880.

<sup>54</sup> Such is the gist of the so-called 'Handlin-Hofstadter thesis.' Cf. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, Boston 1951, p. 217 ff.; Eric Hofstadter, *Age of Reform*, New York 1955, pp. 180–184; also Aronowitz, *False Promises*, p. 164; Gerald Rosenblum, *Immigrant Workers*, New York 1973, esp. pp. 151–154; and Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History*, New York 1976, pp. 68–69.



were often the bases of alternative survival strategies, and the actual impact of immigration depended greatly upon the strength and inclusivity of existing class institutions.

This point is brought out neatly by John Cumber's contrast of the labour movements in the cities of Lynn and Fall River, Massachusetts. Lynn possessed one of the oldest and strongest trade union traditions in America, and its working class was unified by a highly integrated relationship between leisure, work, and the home. Fall River, on the other hand, lacked such cohesive class-based community institutions, and its workforce was decentralized among relatively isolated work and residential areas. In Lynn, where the new immigration was a small, steady flow, the new arrivals were assimilated into the larger, unitary working-class community. In Fall River, in contrast, the arrival of large numbers of Portugese and Poles at the turn of the century was greeted with nativist hostility and led to 'community fragmentation into separate ethnic units of social activity'.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> John T. Cumber, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930*, Westport 1979, p. 8.

Unfortunately most of industrial America was more like Fall River than Lynn. Whereas the Western European class struggles of the 1880s and 1890s had spun a web of integrating proletarian institutions (ranging from workmen's clubs, cooperatives, and 'labour churches' to *casas del pueblo* and workers' educational societies), the US labour movement of the late nineteenth century, as we have seen, failed to generate a working class 'culture' that could overcome the ethno-religious alignments outside the workplace.

### The Impact of the New Division of Labour

Meanwhile, inside the workplace itself, a profound recomposition of the division of labour was reinforcing and overdetermining the effects of the new immigration. The introduction of new mass-production technologies went hand in hand with a corporate assault on the power of skilled labour. This offensive began on a systematic scale with the Carnegie Company's defeat of the powerful Homestead lodges of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers in 1892, and continued for thirty years until the defeat of the railway 'systems federation' strike in 1922 established the supremacy of the open shop. As industrial management broke the power of craftsmen and diluted their skills, however, it carefully avoided 'levelling' them into the ranks of the semi-skilled. Precisely to avoid such an explosive homogenization of status, the companies wooed demoralized skilled workers with piece-rates, bonuses, savings schemes, and 'profit-sharing'. Where craftsmen had traditionally seen themselves as the natural leadership of the labouring class, the corporations now promoted new social norms—especially the 'pride' of home ownership and membership in patriotic associations—that encouraged symbolic assimilation with the petty bourgeoisie. Drawn primarily from native and old-immigrant backgrounds, the skilled workers were purposely mobilized as an indispensable buffer against the organization of the unskilled.

The new immigrants, in turn, were 'frozen' into the ranks of the unskilled. The frenetic geographical mobility of the newcomers—as they were ceaselessly uprooted by the tides of the business cycle or returned home with their small savings—contrasts with their increasing rate of occupational immobility. In one carefully studied Slavic steeltown, for instance, the rate of upward mobility on the job ladder underwent a drastic decline from 32% in 1888 to only 9% in 1905.<sup>56</sup> Moreover within the plants themselves, the labour process was increasingly organized on the basis of ethnically and linguistically segregated work-groups supervised by unsympathetic native craftsmen or foremen. Again, however, the impact of the heterogenization of the workforce depended on whether or not a unifying counter-force of trade unionism existed. In the coalfields of Pennsylvania, for example, the industrially organized Mineworkers succeeded after long struggles in forging a polyglot labour force into a militant membership. In those fiefdoms of 'industrial feudalism' (the steeltowns of Pennsylvania), on the other hand, where the craft unions had been crushed between 1892 and 1901, the workers seemed much more hopelessly divided.

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<sup>56</sup> John Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization*, Pittsburg 1977, p. 56.

## The Ethnic Segregation of the Cities

This industrial caste system was mirrored by the rigid segregation and fragmentation of working-class residential life. By 1910 the American industrial city had developed a strikingly different social physiognomy from that of European factory centres. On both continents the building of street-car systems and elevated/underground railways had given powerful impetus to increasing spatial segregation. In Europe this took the form of further class polarization as proletarian 'east ends' and red *arrondissements* glared across a widening social-spatial gulf at bourgeois 'west ends' and fashionable *faubourgs*. In the United States, by way of contrast, increasing class segregation of housing was overlaid by simultaneously expanding ethnic differentiation. Thus Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburg all acquired after 1890 a characteristic *tripartite* spatial division between (1) middle-class suburbs, (2) a zone of decent, older housing (often single-family) occupied by native workers and some 'old' immigrants, and (3) an inner core of tenements, shabby apartments, and overcrowded boarding houses that provided dormitories for the new immigrant proletariat. Further transposed upon the belts of working-class residence was a grid—almost microscopically detailed in some cities—of ethnically and linguistically differentiated neighbourhoods, 'each with an institutional life of its own'.<sup>57</sup>

Mediating this complex residential and workplace polarization between the native/skilled and immigrant/unskilled workers, were the 'old' foreign-stock Catholic workers, Irish and German. This intermediary stratum, particularly its Irish component, held an ambivalent but pivotal place within the internal structure of the working class. On one hand, the Irish were partially integrated into the more privileged segment of the proletariat by their successful penetration of the skilled trades and by their disproportionate weight in the emergent trade union bureaucracy. (Karson has discovered, for example, that no fewer than 62 AFL unions had Irish Catholic presidents in the 1906–1918 period.<sup>58</sup>) Many of them also lived in the same 'better off' neighbourhoods with the native skilled workers. On the other hand, they were linked to the new immigrants by economic status—since a majority of the Irish (especially the new arrivals) were still in 1910 unskilled labourers or transport workers—as well as by their domination of the two central institutions upon which most new immigrants were vitally dependent: the Catholic Church and the Democratic patronage machines in most industrial cities.

Finally, standing outside of the principal sub-cultural alignments of the working class were several exceptional groups of Central and Eastern European immigrants. Although every nation sent its exiled radicals across the Atlantic, the predominant languages of Marxism

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 14; also O. Zunz, 'Detroit en 1880: espace et ségrégation', *Annales*, 32, 1, January–February 1977; Josef Berton, *Peasants and Strangers*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1975, p. 18.

<sup>58</sup> Marc Karson, *American Labour Unions and Politics: 1900–1918*, Carbondale 1958, pp. 221–224.

in America have been German and Yiddish.<sup>59</sup> The employer's blacklists and Bismark's antisocialist laws forced new generations of German-Lassalleans, anarchist followers of Jonathan Most, and Marxists to follow the footsteps of the 'red 48ers' who had emigrated to the United States. In the late nineteenth century these revolutionary German workmen—from whose ranks came the Haymarket martyrs Spies, Engel, and Fischer—created their own extraordinary German-speaking cultural apparatus of gymnastic societies, rifle clubs, educational circles, and socialist beer-gardens. They also played the major role in building such important unions as the Brewers, Cigar Makers, and Bakers. For several generations they were the left wing of the labour movements in Chicago and St Louis, but without question their greatest accomplishment was making Milwaukee the strongest citadel of socialism in America from 1910 to 1954.

The other great concentration of immigrant radicalism was the Lower East Side of New York where a million Jewish and Italian immigrants were crammed into the densest tenement district in the world. One of the unexpected after effects of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was to provide the Lower East Side with an exiled cadre of brilliant young labour Bundists and Jewish Social Democrats. In a remarkably few years they had organized a mass base of fifty thousand or so Yiddish-speaking socialist voters who crusaded for garment unionism and provided the backbone of left-wing opposition to Tammany Hall.

## 2. The Twin Souls of American Socialism

The aspiration of Debsian socialism was to unify and represent this divided and culturally multiform American proletariat. In the wake of the Panic of 1907 and the Supreme Court's draconian attacks on trade unionism (the Danbury Hatters' and the Buck's Stove and Range cases—the American equivalents of Taff Vale), there was a powerful surge of working-class votes towards the Socialist Party, despite Gompers's attempt to steer labour into a *de facto* alliance with the Democrats. Yet by the high point of 1912 the party was being torn apart by internal schisms and ideological divergencies. The crisis of the party, of course, had many causes, but above all it reflected the contradictory dynamic of the class struggle in the Progressive era.

The years between 1909 and 1913 marked a watershed in the history of the international labour movement. In the United States, as well as in Britain, Germany, France and Russia, they saw the outbreak of violent 'mass' strikes and the entry of new strata of unskilled workers into the class struggle. Beginning with the rebellion of immigrant steel workers in McKees Rock (Pennsylvania) and sweated New York garment workers (the Shirtwaist Strike) in 1909, the supposedly 'unorganizable' immigrant proletariat erupted in militant upheaval. Supported by the Industrial Workers of the World and the Socialist organizers of the

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<sup>59</sup> The third language would probably have been Finnish. Far-left Finnish labourers left their indelible mark across the Northwest from the Mesabi iron mines to the Astoria fisheries, and the Finnish Socialist Federation organized a unique mass emigration of loggers and miners to the Karelian Soviet Republic in the early 1920s.

garment unions, the new workers launched strike after strike across a spectrum of mass-production industries from textile to auto. Simultaneously the AFL—already hard-pressed by the so-called ‘Employers’ Mass Offensive’ of 1903–1908—had to fight bitter, rearguard battles against the degradation of their crafts by dilution, ‘Taylorism’, and speed-up. The longest and most epic of these struggles was the spectacular forty-five month fight of the railway shop crafts against the introduction of scientific management on the Harriman lines in 1911–1915.

### Labour’s ‘Civil War’

Unlike the strike waves of the 1877–1896 period, however, the mass strikes of the early twentieth century largely failed to unify native and immigrant workers. Failing a convergence between the defensive fights of skilled labour and the organizing campaigns amongst the new immigrants, the movements tended to assume divergent and all too frequently antagonistic postures. Indeed the split within the working class became so profound that some Socialist writers regularly wrote of the ‘civil war’ in labour’s ranks, while IWW organizers complained that the AFL unions were deliberately undermining and sabotaging the strikes of the immigrant proletariat.

This discord between the struggles of the craft unions and unorganized immigrants was carried into the Socialist Party in the form of a conflict between its reformist and syndicalist wings. The reformists, led by Victor Berger from his German Socialist bastion in Wisconsin, were committed to a programme of Bersteinian gradualism exemplified by the mild civic meliorism and sporadic criticism of Gompers’s leadership of the AFL. They possessed no strategy or visible commitment to the unionization of the unorganized, and were generally indistinguishable from the AFL mainstream in their support for racist immigration restrictions. Berger, moreover, was a declared white supremacist. As for the attitude of the right wing toward the new immigrants, Sally Miller provides this characterization of the ‘model’ Milwaukee party: ‘While theoretically it was deplorable that organized labour was restricted to the skilled, in practice the Milwaukee socialists were comfortable with skilled German union men and scornful of unskilled new immigrants. The partnership they envisioned with labour was one of Germans and natives almost exclusively.’<sup>60</sup> In contrast, the socialist left wing—many of whom angrily withdrew from the party after Big Bill Hayward was purged in 1912—adopted an almost exclusively industrial perspective that focused on the allegedly imminent revolutionary potential of the immigrant and unorganized workers. They repudiated the AFL as a hopeless cause and concentrated their energies in building the One Big Union. Although these left socialists played invaluable supporting roles in the wave of immigrant strikes in basic industry, their syndicalism proved to be only a temporary tactical palliative for the needs of the unorganized factory proletariat. The IWW could exemplify fighting solidarity at the workplace

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<sup>60</sup> Sally Miller, ‘Milwaukee: Of Ethnicity and Labour’, in Bruce Stave (ed.), *Socialism and the Cities*, Port Washington 1975, p. 45.

but it had almost nothing to say about the political problems of slum communities caught up in complex dependencies upon the power of church and patronage. It is not surprising that of the great strikes of this period, with the exception of the campaign of the New York garment unions, none left either durable union organization or led to any local victories for socialist candidates.

### The Failure of the Socialist Party

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that neither of the two major tendencies of American socialism in 1912 offered a realistic strategy for uniting the working class or coordinating trade union strategy with socialist intervention in the urban political arena. The reformists had no plan for building industrial unionism, while the revolutionaries saw no point in attempting to influence skilled workers or in contesting Gompers's domination of the AFL. Similarly, neither the 'sewer socialism' of the right (whose municipal programme was often—as Walter Lippman pointed out—indistinguishable from progressivism) nor the apoliticism of the syndicalist left met the need for a socialist political solution to the urban crisis and the plight of the slum proletariat. At every level the strategic perspectives of American socialism remained contradictory, embryonic, and unsynthesized.

On an organizational plane, the party never really attempted to meld its different social components into an organic whole; in reality American socialism remained a series of ethnically and linguistically segmented socialisms. Thus the most important socialist electoral strongholds were ethnically homogeneous constituencies: Germans in Milwaukee, Scandinavians in Minneapolis, Jews in Manhattan, Pennsylvania Dutch in Reading. Furthermore the leadership of the party kept the separate language organizations of the smaller ethnic socialisms at a distance from one another and from the levers of power within the party: "The immigrant socialists were the Party's transmission belt to the new immigrant workers. But the Party never set this transmission belt in motion. Instead, partly motivated by nativism and racism and worried by their politics, it kept these immigrant socialists adrift, failing to integrate them."<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the gravest failing of the party, however, was its utter inability to penetrate the core of the industrial working class: the old and new Catholic immigrants. Compared to their dominating presence in the AFL, for example, Irish radicals—although they included such fiery organizers as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, William Z. Foster and James Cannon—were only a beleaguered handful. Of the several million Poles concentrated in the industrial heartland, perhaps two or three thousand at most were affiliated to the right-wing Polish Socialist Federation. Meanwhile *Il Proletario* moaned that 'in a city that numbers 650,000 Italians [New York] there are a couple of hundred socialists

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Leinenweber, "The American Socialist Party and the "New Immigrants", *Science and Society*, Winter 1968, p. 25.

registered with the party'.<sup>62</sup> While some historians have simply claimed that the opposition of the Catholic Church precluded any mass radicalization of Irish, Polish, or Italian labourers, the reasons would seem more complex. Italian immigrants to Argentina, after all, were the builders of a very radical labour movement, while Polish immigrant miners in the Ruhr were quite accessible to revolutionary agitation. Perhaps that temporary sojourner in American socialism, James Connolly, was right when he argued against Daniel De Leon that anti-clerical, anti-papist propaganda in an American context would always be mistaken by Catholic immigrants as another species of nativism. Connolly may have had particularly in mind the *Appeal to Reason*, the spectacularly successful (750,000 subscribers) socialist journal from the cornbelt, which declaimed virulently against both the Catholic church and the new immigration. Another kind of argument has been made by Melvyn Dubofsky in his study of the failure of the Socialist Party to reach the New York Irish: he points out that the 'Irish immigrant link to the Democratic machine, well established by the end of the nineteenth century, was at floodtide in the Progressive era when Boss Charles Murphy grafted modern social reforms onto the old wardheeling Tammany structure'.<sup>63</sup> The implication is that the Irish workers by virtue of their relatively privileged access to trade union organization and political patronage, were little tempted by the entreaties of a predominantly Jewish socialist movement which, if it ever came to power, might dismantle the traditional Hibernian job trust at city hall.

### The Struggle for Industrial Unionism

One of the minor tragedies of the Socialist Party was that its bitter factional battles contributed so little to the recognition or clarification of these underlying strategic contradictions. Debs, almost alone at times, seemed to have a strong intuitive grasp of the fact that socialism could never hope to win the American working class politically unless the internal unity of the class could be grounded in some common direction of struggle. He hoped that the movement for industrial unionism could provide such a unifying practice—answering the needs of both craftsmen and operatives—and, for that reason, he came to reject the dual unionism espoused by the syndicalist left wing. In this spirit he issued a somewhat quixotic call in 1914 for the formation of an industrial union 'centre' based on an alliance of the Eastern (UMW) and Western (WFM) miners, which could lead organizational campaigns in the mass-production industries and establish an alternative pole to Gomperism.<sup>64</sup> Although Deb's *Appeal* was ignored, its spirit was resurrected in 1917 when the Chicago Federation of Labor under the militant leadership of John Fitzpatrick and Edward Nockels decided to flaunt narrow craft shibboleths and to pool resources for a bold organizing drive in the

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<sup>62</sup> *Il Proletario*, quoted in S.M. Tomasi and M.H. Engel (eds.), *The Italian Experience in the United States*, Staten Island 1970, p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, 'Success and Failure of Socialism in New York City, 1900–1918: A Case Study', *Labor History*, Fall 1968, p. 372.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel De Leon, of course, was the premier theorist of 'revolutionary industrial unionism', except that in his fervid sectarian conception this entailed winning the working class to the Socialist Labor Party's tiny 'socialist unions' rather than work within existing unions.

stockyards. With William Z. Foster as chief organizer and abetted by the government's fear of wartime strikes, 100,000 packinghouse workers in Chicago and neighbouring cities were unionized in a historic victory over the big packers in 1918.

### 1919: the Test of Steel

The next year, with the faint-hearted and unreliable support of the AFL leadership, Foster and Fitzpatrick attempted to carry the methods of the stockyard campaign to the steel valleys of Pennsylvania and the mill neighbourhoods of South Chicago. The steel industry was the Maginot Line of the open shop in America, and it was universally recognized that its organization was the strategic key to the entire industrial working class. Although the House of Morgan had wiped out the last vestiges of craft unionism a decade before, Foster and Fitzpatrick found hope in the growing unrest of the immigrant steel-workers who laboured seven days a week, twelve hours a day in the deadly mills for poverty wages. Despite the vacillating attitude of the skilled native workers and the complex problems of craft territoriality (no less than 24 AFL unions claimed jurisdictions in steel), several hundred thousand, primarily immigrant, steel-workers heeded Foster's strike call against the most powerful industrial monopoly in the world. The Slavs and Italians held firm for three months against the 'cossack terror' of the state police and company guards, but in the end the strike was betrayed by the craft unions and undermined by the growing climate of anti-radical, anti-foreign hysteria in the country.

As one historian has put it, 1919 was the 'turning point . . . which didn't turn'.<sup>65</sup> It was the failed test of native labour's ability to unite with the immigrant proletariat. The defeat of the steel-workers' organizing drive marked the end of the remarkable insurgency of Eastern and Southern European workers which had rocked industry since 1909. Faced with a tidal wave of nativist reaction, exemplified by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in midwestern industrial states, the 'new' immigrants retreated into the sanctuaries of ethnic community until the Depression triggered a second, even more militant upsurge. As for the skilled workers, the 1919 defeat opened the way for a broad employers' offensive that rolled back the wartime gains of the AFL and established the open-shop 'American Plan' upon the ruins of the once mighty mineworkers and railway shop unions.

### The Last Act

In this period of general retreat, however, a last great outburst of popular radicalism flared across the Northwestern tier of states from Illinois to Washington. The Farmer Labor Party movement of 1919–24 drew energy from a number of centres of resistance, including the militant city labour federations in Chicago, Seattle, and Minneapolis, embattled coalminers in Southern Illinois, immigrant iron-miners in Minnesota, and the semi-socialist Non-Partisan Leagues in the Dakotas.

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<sup>65</sup> David Brody, *Labor in Crisis—The Steel Strike of 1919*, Philadelphia and New York 1965, cover note.

Attempting to fill the vacuum left by the factional disintegration of the Socialist Party in 1919, the third-party movement aimed to unify a fightback against the bosses' offensive, government repression, falling crop prices, and the coal depression. After a number of false starts and premature initiatives, the powerful Farmer Labor Party of Minnesota, already in control of its state's government, assumed leadership of the movement to regroup the various popular blocs into a new national party. Although the movement had to blend a diversity of ideologies ranging from Republican progressivism to bolshevism, it made great strides in mobilizing labour support in neighbouring states. At this point, on the very eve of the founding convention, Gompers (in a repeat performance of his earlier sabotage of Labour-Populism) and the railway brotherhoods intervened to wreck the embryonic new party. Red-baiting the Minnesota movement for allowing Communist participation, they convinced the venerable progressive statesman, Robert LaFollete, to refuse nomination and a third party ticket, and thereby scuttled the electoral strategy which farmer-labourites had hoped would unite the new party. Although LaFollette ran on an independent ticket endorsed by the AFL in the 1924 presidential elections, the actual labour support was desultory and paved the way for the AFL's return to its old non-partisan bunker.

It would be hard to exaggerate the magnitude of American labour's defeat in the 1919–1924 period. For almost a decade the corporations were virtually free from the challenge of militant unionism. In the interlude of the 'American Plan' employers accelerated the attack on worker 'control' within the labour process, the new mass-production technologies advancing side by side with new forms of corporate management and work supervision. The totality of this transformation of the labour process—first 'Taylorism', then 'Fordism'—conferred vastly expanded powers of domination through its systematic decomposition of skills and serialization of the workforce.<sup>66</sup> Already by the end of the First World War, the capitalist class in United States (especially in the advanced sectors of the 'Second Technological Revolution': vehicles, electrical machinery, chemicals, and other consumer durables) was perhaps a generation ahead of its European competitors in the degree to which skilled labour had been subordinated and fragmented in the labour process. At the same time, however, the revolution in production and the post-war debacle of the AFL was weakening the material props of craft consciousness. The 'Fordist' integration of mass production was setting the stage for the emergence of the CIO and a rebirth of industrial unionism.

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<sup>66</sup> The productivity revolution represented by the new labour processes resulted in an almost 50% increase in industrial production between 1918 and 1928 while the factory workforce actually declined by 6%. Thus, as Stan Vittoz, has pointed out, "the traditional dependence by American industry on a continual influx of low-cost immigrant labor never returned after the war," and big business raised only half-hearted opposition to the successful nativist campaign for immigration restriction in the early 1920s. Vittoz, 'World War I and the Political Accommodation of Transitional Market Forces: The Case of Immigration Restriction', *Politics and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1978, p. 65.