

REVIEW ESSAY

**A CENTURY OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM:
A REVIEW OF SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET AND GARY MARKS,
*IT DIDN'T HAPPEN HERE: WHY SOCIALISM FAILED IN THE
UNITED STATES* (NEW YORK AND LONDON: W W NORTON, 2000)**

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Friedrich Engels followed the events of 1886 across the Atlantic with jubilation. American workers had flooded into the Knights of Labor; they struck en masse for the eight-hour working day on May 1; in the November elections, they voted for labor candidates, most notably Henry George in New York City. This could not, of course, compare to Germany, where the Social Democratic Party captured 10% of the vote despite legal persecution. The Anglo-Saxons—“those damned Schleswig-Holsteiners,” as Marx joked—on both sides of the Atlantic had proved an embarrassment for Marx and Engels. In theory, the most industrially developed societies represented the future of the less developed. Yet socialism remained marginal in Britain and the United States, the capitalist societies par excellence. That is why Engels greeted the rapid growth of the American labor movement in 1886 with such enthusiasm. “[I]f we in Europe do not hurry up” he wrote, “the Americans will soon outdistance us.” There was now hope for Britain, where the Trades Union Congress was dominated by labor aristocrats devoted to retaining their privileged position within the working class. Marx’s daughter Eleanor and her husband Edward Aveling, returning from a visit to the United States, concluded: “The example of the American working men will be followed before long on the European side of the Atlantic. An English or, if you will, a British Labour Party will be formed, foe alike to Liberal and Conservative.” The example was not only political. Spanish anarchists and French syndicalists were inspired by the

general strike for eight hours. After the American Federation of Labor took up the eight-hour campaign again in 1889, the Second International emulated the American example and adopted May 1 as the date to demonstrate for shorter hours and celebrate working-class solidarity.

Over the 1890s, however, the American working-class movement lost its place in the vanguard of the Anglophone world. In Britain, two labor candidates won seats in Parliament in 1892, and the following year the Independent Labour Party was founded. Engels was less enthusiastic about this than the American events of 1886, but he nonetheless recognized the potential of the Party as a vehicle of working-class political aspirations. With less international attention, but more immediate success, nascent labor parties emerged in the Australian colonies. In New South Wales, the Labor Electoral League won 35 seats—a quarter of the total!—at its first election in 1891. By 1893, labor gained representation in the parliaments of South Australia and Queensland. In Australia and Britain, the subsequent years were ones of frustration as well as hope; there was no inexorable progress towards power. Nevertheless, the working class retained a distinctive voice in parliament and eventually created a cohesive party organization, closely linked with the trade unions. In America, by contrast, the independent labor parties of 1886 had collapsed completely.

By the turn of the century, socialists could consider America as exceptional—in the negative sense. Werner Sombart posed the famous question in 1906, though with a less appropriate frame of reference: Continental Europe. Throughout the twentieth century, socialists and social scientists have returned over and over to the puzzle. American exceptionalism became more pronounced as working-class parties gained electoral strength and eventually acceded to government, in Australasia and Britain as well as Continental Europe. Yet there has never been a successful socialist, communist, or labor party in the United States. This absence has made a decisive difference to state and society: it helps explain the impoverished welfare state and the remarkably high level of inequality.

It Didn't Happen Here, by Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, is a fitting finale to a century of argument about *Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. Lipset has previously tackled the broader question of America's uniqueness on many dimensions besides class politics. Emphasizing cultural values (akin to Tocqueville's mores) such as individualism, he argues that these deeply rooted principles continue to shape American society. One of his most valuable contributions is systematic comparison with Canada—a society also forged in

the American revolution, though on the side of counter-revolution. Marks has compared the political orientation of unions representing the same groups of workers in different countries. In collaboration, they have now produced an impressive work of comparative and historical social science. It provides a comprehensive and convincing account of the failures of socialist politics from the 1890s to the 1930s. For this period, one suspects that future research will not add or subtract much of consequence to their account. But the authors leave loose ends on either side of this period. In the 1880s (as we have seen), Marxists held up the American labor movement as an example for Britain and other Anglophone societies—it was exceptional in the positive sense. Only in the 1890s, after the success of independent labor parties in Australia and Britain, was the comparison reversed. In the 1930s, half a century later, the New Deal coalition held out the promise of social democracy within the Democratic party. Yet again, however, this promise evaporated in the following decade.

EXOGENOUS AND ENDOGENOUS FACTORS

Lipset and Marks argue that four factors were decisive. One was the inherent disadvantages posed by the American political system for third parties. Another was the peculiar mores of American culture, especially antistatism and individualism. A third was the heterogeneous working class, stratified by ethnicity and language. The final factor was the enduring schism between the trade unions and the political parties that claimed to represent the working class. The authors are reluctant to isolate any one factor: the result, they say, was “overdetermined.” Nevertheless, they imply that the schism between party and unions, while obviously influenced by the other factors, was especially important. In addition, they do not shrink from pointing out the dogmatic blunders perpetuated by generations of American socialists. Lipset and Marks are to be congratulated for resisting the temptation to attribute defeat entirely to exogenous causes—the situation within which working-class activists were placed, and the materials with which they had to work. Endogenous causes emerge as equally significant. Aside from providing their own explanation, the authors make an equally valuable contribution by rejecting some of the more common hypotheses.

The peculiar American political system has been the most popular candidate for explaining exceptionalism, ever since the state was brought back into social science. Scholars including Ira Katznelson (1985), Richard Oestreicher (1988), William Forbath (1991), and Victoria

Hattam (1993) have focused on the ‘gift’ of (white) male suffrage, the federal polity, the first-past-the-post electoral system, and the separation of powers—especially the dominance of courts. Lipset and Marks clear away this profusion of political impediments with sharp international comparison. Working-class men gained the vote without a struggle in Australasia too. Germany, Switzerland, and Australia also have federal polities. The Westminster electoral system also discriminates against third parties, which gain proportionally far fewer seats in parliament than their share of the vote. Judicial hegemony is uniquely American, as Tocqueville recognized, but by itself it cannot explain why the American Federation of Labor decided to influence the legal system by supporting one of the major parties (usually the Democrats) rather than a third party. It is true, of course, that Democratic and Republican parties had sunk deep roots into communities of urban workers by the late nineteenth century, cultivating ethno-religious identities and providing patronage. Because the main parties were so porous, they easily absorbed occasional attempts to mobilize around class, beginning with the Workingmen’s parties of the 1830s.

Although America is exceptional for preserving its two-party duopoly for well over a century, third parties have on occasion achieved considerable success. What is remarkable, as Lipset and Marks point out, is that socialists never attained even that success. Aside from the recent stunning success of Ross Perot, there were two high points in presidential elections. In 1892, the Populists won 8.5% of the vote; in 1924, La Follette—running as an independent Republican—won 17%. The latter’s candidacy was endorsed by trade unionists, but the American Federation of Labor made it clear that this was a temporary expedient, intended to punish the two main parties for nominating anti-labor candidates. The 1924 result may nonetheless reveal the reservoir of electoral strength that could have been tapped by a viable labor party, even if it might never have gained the White House.

Alternatively, if America is a two-party state, then there was a real possibility that one of them could have been captured for labor. While scholars have fixated on the constraints imposed by the American political system, Lipset and Marks draw attention to a unique opportunity: the popular nomination primary, which many states adopted in the early twentieth century. As they point out, “one of the key features of American politics that makes life so difficult for minor parties, the primary system, made a strategy of ‘boring from within,’ that is, contesting primaries within the major parties, more feasible” (p. 265). This strategy was used to spectacular effect in North Dakota by A. C. Townley, a socialist who

understood the potential radicalism of small farmers. In 1916, his Nonpartisan League won control of the Republican party at the primaries, and so elected its candidate as governor; two years later, it won control of the state legislature. It enacted an impressive program of agrarian state socialism, which is reminiscent of New Zealand's first Labour government in the 1930s. Primaries could be subverted outside Midwestern farm states too. Upton Sinclair, for example, gained considerable success (though not gubernatorial office) in his campaign to End Poverty in California, within the Democratic party, in 1934.

Aside from political institutions, the peculiar mores of American culture have been antithetical to the socialist project. "The antistatist, antiauthoritarian component of American ideology, derived from Jefferson's declaration of Independence, remains an underlying source of the weakness of socialism in the United States." (p. 22) This part of the authors' argument is least developed; they do not devote a separate chapter to it. It is a plausible generalization, though it may not always withstand detailed examination. After the Civil War, for example, working-class activists conducted a lengthy campaign to legislate the eight-hour day, at the state and Federal level. In Britain, by contrast, proponents of similar legislation in the 1890s faced determined resistance by weavers and some coalminers. If the American Federation of Labor from the 1890s "came close to syndicalism" in rejecting state regulation (p. 98), then that might have reflected unionists' political frustration in previous decades rather than enduring American values. As Lipset and Marks themselves observe, the persistence of antistatist values was also a result of the failure of socialism.

The United States differs from other 'neo-European' societies in the diversity of its immigrants. As a result, the working class was exceptionally stratified by ethnicity, religion, and language. According to the authors, "while many Socialists were immigrants, relatively few immigrants were Socialists" (p. 159). This paradox does not take us far, because even fewer native-born Americans were Socialists. More pertinent is their observation that socialism was most successful in relatively homogenous communities: whether of native-born Protestants, as in Oklahoma (a citadel of the Socialist party before the First World War), or of radical European immigrants, as in the Lower East Side of New York City. In such communities, mobilization around class was not impeded—or was even reinforced—by ethnocultural identity. Of course some immigrant groups were more receptive to socialism than others. Lipset and Marks analyze electoral support for the Socialist party in several states in 1912—its peak, when Eugene Debs won 6% of the vote—and 1920. The proportion

of immigrants from Scandinavia and from Russia (largely Jewish) is positively associated with the Socialist vote. The proportion of German immigrants has a positive effect only for the latter date, when the Socialist party had become identified with opposition to the war. Strong support from radical immigrants was a mixed blessing, for it contributed to the extremism of American socialism (to which we will return below).

The diversity of its immigrants, the peculiarity of its institutions and values—these aspects of America were structural impediments for working-class activists. A rather different kind of exogenous factor is repression, a deliberate response to workers' mobilization. Recently this has been a popular explanation: Leon Fink (1988), Kim Voss (1993), and Gerald Friedman (1998) single out repression as the most important cause of failure. The American ruling class is surely distinctive, witnessed by its willingness to use lethal violence against workers until the late 1930s. To some extent this simply reflects the general violence of American society. More than this, however, any articulation of working-class demands was treated as fundamentally illegitimate by the bourgeoisie, and this sets the United States apart from the other Anglophone societies. The historical sociology of capitalist class consciousness remains yet to be written. Nevertheless, repression cannot bear the explanatory burden which has been placed upon it, as Lipset and Marks argue persuasively. The United States was not uniquely repressive; socialists were also vigorously persecuted, for example, in Germany and Argentina. In those countries, however, the movement rebounded in numbers and commitment. During the First World War, when repression in America was at its most virulent, support for the Socialist Party remained undiminished in communities like Minneapolis and Milwaukee. It was destroyed, however, in communities where opposition to the war was viewed as treason. The lesson is that the effect of repression in a democracy depends on the legitimacy of the victims: those who can claim the mantle of legitimacy (like non-violent black protesters in the 1960s) may even perversely benefit from repression, while those who court illegitimacy by threatening the fundamental political system (like the Black Panthers) are easily isolated and eradicated.

This brings us to the strategies of working-class activists, and the organizations that they created. These endogenous factors are often overlooked, because sympathizers of a social movement are naturally reluctant to identify its failings, and because social scientists are wary of any explanation that is not entirely exogenous. *It Didn't Happen Here* is a refreshing change in this respect.

The authors place considerable emphasis on the schism between unions and party. The American Federation of Labor was exceptional for opposing independent political activity, and for its hostility to socialism. This anti-political orientation becomes explicable by distinguishing exclusive from inclusive unionism. The Federation was dominated by craft unions who pursued an exclusive strategy, concerned above all to protect their narrow domain of the labor market from competition. These unions did not need political leverage to regulate working conditions, nor did they wield large concentrations of votes. Inclusive unions, by contrast, organized workers in large numbers and could not restrict the supply of labor. Such unions—like the United Mine Workers of America, the Australian Workers' Union (for shearers and other rural workers), and the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers in Great Britain—were in the vanguard of political activity, wherever they were. In America, however, inclusive organizations represented only a minority of the labor movement from the 1890s to the 1930s. They never garnered enough votes in the American Federation of Labor to reorient its policy. As a result, any labor or socialist party was deprived of a solid base in the trade unions. Given its extreme radicalism, the Socialist party won an impressive share of the vote in the 1910s—but its membership remained miniscule. The labor movement in the United States never had the mutual reinforcement of masses voting for a working-class party as well as belonging to a union.

The other side of the schism was the dogmatic radicalism of socialists who were engaged in independent politics. Indeed, the schism became self-reinforcing. As the Socialist party became more doctrinaire, it further antagonized trade unionists. Without the need to maintain the support of union members, socialists were free to adopt more radical stances. Even in the 1880s, Engels noted—and deplored—the self-defeating dogmatism of German socialism in America; socialists apparently learned nothing in the succeeding half century. Lipset and Marks identify two stances which most contributed to their marginalization. One was militant atheism, which effectively alienated the sizeable proportion of workers who were Catholic (in religion or culture). This explains why the Irish were uniformly hostile to socialism in America, while so many supported labor in Australasia and Britain. Of still greater consequence was the Socialist party's opposition to the war. Unlike almost all other socialist or labor parties—but like the Russian Bolsheviks!—it did not succumb to wartime nationalism. This principled stance is admirable, but it destroyed the party's support among English-speaking Americans. It also ensured that the American labor movement reaped no

political advantage from wartime state socialism (in which organized labor occupied a vital role) or postwar class conflict.

Where socialists compromised in order to attract voters and where they allied with trade unions, they proved that a 'labor party' could win office in America, just as it did elsewhere. Milwaukee was run by a Socialist mayor from 1910 to 1940, and it elected a Socialist to Congress. Other significant examples included Minneapolis and Reading, Pennsylvania. Municipal socialism—along with agrarian radicalism in the West—had demonstrated considerable success by the First World War. At the national level, however, this kind of right deviationism was repudiated by the Socialist party, and many effective local leaders (like Townley) were expelled to maintain sectarian purity. In Britain or Australasia these same men would have risen to prominence in labor politics. Ironically, it may have been the exceptional *strength* of socialism in America that ensured the absence of an independent labor party.

TURNING POINTS AND COMPARISONS

It Didn't Happen Here, in sum, is an impressive answer to the question of exceptionalism. Because the book is arranged thematically rather than chronologically, the periodization of exceptionalism remains implicit. Indeed, most scholars who have studied exceptionalism either treat it as a timeless characteristic or assume that it was determined in one single episode. By focusing on comparison with other Anglophone societies, we can identify three moments of particular significance—turning points which did not turn.

In the early 1890s, fledgling labor parties were formed in Britain and Australia. Lipset and Marks describe what failed to happen in the United States. The American Federation of Labor came close to supporting independent political action on the British model in 1894—when Gompers was temporarily ejected from the office of President—but the moment passed. Lipset and Marks are surely correct in attributing this to the dominance of exclusive craft unions. In the previous decade, however, those unions had been eclipsed by an inclusive labor organization: the Knights of Labor. This was “the first national organization created by the American Working Class as a whole,” as Engels recognized. It recruited all kinds of manual workers, without distinction of occupation or industry; it was even open to other ‘producers,’ like small farmers. It breached the boundaries of gender and ethnicity,

welcoming women, foreign immigrants, and blacks (though not Chinese). Spreading beyond North America, it reached into Western Europe and Australasia. Why did the Knights of Labor not become the basis for a labor party? The authors only hint at an answer.

The Knights of Labor was beset by two problems. Firstly, the organization was not intended for conflict with employers. Unlike the leading craft unions, it lacked the means to control strikes and to fund striking members. More importantly, it lacked any coherent industrial organization. The official leadership disapproved of Local Assemblies organized by trade; anyway, Local Assemblies were combined into District Assemblies which were for the most part defined by location. (These districts resembled municipal Trades Councils in Britain and Australasia.) The Knights of Labor was so ineffective because the official leadership—and above all the General Master Workman, Terence Powderly—believed in class harmony. For them, strikes were anathema; to restore justice between capital and labor, public opinion had only to be educated properly. Needless to say, such notions left the Knights without any defense against capitalists, who were determined to crush any workplace organization. Secondly, the Knights of Labor competed for members with existing trade unions. In this respect it was quite different from the New Unionism which emerged in Britain and Australasia in the late 1880s, which did not attempt to recruit skilled craftsmen. Even that attracted suspicion from craft unions. In America, direct competition led eventually to all-out war.

There may have been an alternative path for the Knights of Labor, which was a diverse and decentralized organization. Many local activists—especially in industrial cities—were inspired by socialism, and understood the antagonistic relationship between labor and capital. While they chafed against exclusive unionism, they were prepared to ally with craft unionists against the common enemy. Essentially they wanted New Unionism, with the Knights of Labor as its vehicle. Unfortunately, Powderly was able to maintain his “impotent despotism” (as Engels aptly called it), and ultimately expelled all those who wanted to steer the organization on this course. This also quashed a remarkably successful foray into electoral politics. Although the organization never formally endorsed the various labor parties that sprang up in 1886, the Knights of Labor provided most of the candidates and the bulk of their votes. The leadership subsequently imposed its official apolitical stance.

Trade unionists created the American Federation of Labor in 1886, as a defensive alliance against the Knights of Labor. The circumstances of its birth left a lasting imprint. In the mind

of unionists like Gompers, inclusive unionism was forever associated with the failure of the Knights of Labor and with the specter of dual unionism. This memory remained potent even fifty years later. In 1936 the President of the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners opposed the Committee for Industrial Organization because it would “take the labor movement back to the days of the K of L.” Trade unionists retained another lesson from this period. At the beginning of the 1880s, many were optimistic about political action. They founded the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (modeled on the British Trades Union Congress) in 1881 in order to promote national legislation. They were soon disappointed. Efforts to enforce the eight-hour day for Federal employees, as provided by law, came to naught. There were many frustrations at the state level too. Measures to restrict tenement cigar production and to protect strikers from criminal prosecution, for example, ultimately failed. These experiences were at least as important as the antistatism of American culture in explaining the ‘syndicalism’ of American trade unionists. That attitude was clearly announced when the Federation called on workers to enforce shorter hours themselves on May 1, 1886.

All this provides an explanation for the failure of the early 1890s. As the Knights of Labor disintegrated and the American Federation of Labor turned away from politics, agrarian radicalism emerged in the West and the South. The powerful current of Populism remained isolated from the labor movement. It reached its crescendo in 1896, when Bryan ran for President as a fusion Democrat-Populist candidate. The campaign lacked any appeal to the urban working class, and it was defeated in the cities. Thus ended the first turning point that failed to turn.

Failure in the late nineteenth century did not, however, make the United States unique. New Zealand and Canada also entered the twentieth century without a coherent labor party. The latter years of the First World War and its immediate aftermath were the next turning point. Almost everywhere the labor movement made spectacular gains. A New Zealand Labour Party was founded after several abortive attempts; a Canadian Labour Party entered national politics, though it was not to endure. *It Didn't Happen Here* revolves around this second moment. The authors comprehensively explain why such intense class conflict in the United States—far more workers struck in 1919 than in any other year before or since—did not give rise to any enduring political organization. This failure still did not condemn the American labor movement to exceptionalism. The difference between Canada and America remained

slight. Canada's Trades and Labour Congress did not support any independent party, and only a few members represented labor in the national parliament. The Great Depression was the third turning point. In Canada, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (ancestral to today's New Democratic Party) was founded, and within a few years it had become the second party in some provinces.

In this third moment, as Lipset and Marks recount, the American working class was mobilized as never before. Inclusive unionism swept through the mass-production industries from the mid 1930s. By then, however, the Socialist party had relegated itself to irrelevance. The Communist party flourished only when Moscow ordered it to pursue a 'Popular Front' strategy, from 1935 to 1939 and from 1941 to 1948. The impetus for independent labor politics was skillfully diverted by Roosevelt, through a combination of radical rhetoric and prudent patronage. The Progressive party in Wisconsin, the Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota, and the American Labor party in New York were kept inside the New Deal coalition; they were ultimately absorbed by the Democratic party. Why, then, did that not simply become the functional equivalent of a labor party? After all, the association between voters' social class and partisan preference was almost as strong in the United States as in Britain by the early 1940s (according to recent analysis by David Weakliem and Anthony Heath [1999]). And the association was far stronger than in Canada. "Those on the left and center of the Democratic party"—observe Lipset and Marks—"resembled Europe's social democrats" (p. 290). What happened to prevent this convergence? They refer to "long-term prosperity" after the Second World War, but this is hardly sufficient.

The explanation, of course, lies south of the Mason-Dixon line.. Unfortunately, Lipset and Marks ignore the American South (it receives no entry in the comprehensive index). This omission is significant, first because any analysis of variation within the United States should consider not only positive cases (like Milwaukee) but also negative ones. The labor movement was persistently weakest in the South. Second, and more importantly, the Democratic party was also the party of racial apartheid and elite hegemony in the South. This was an insuperable barrier to social democracy, as Frances Fox Piven (1991) and other political scientists have pointed out. Research by Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger, and Daniel Kryder (1993) shows how southern Democrats supported the New Deal as long as legislation was crafted so as to exclude agricultural and domestic labor (where blacks were concentrated) and to ensure decentralized administration. During the 1940s, however, they

joined with Republicans to veto further labor legislation, and indeed to erode what had been gained. This culminated in the Taft-Hartley Act in 1948. Within a few years, the membership of trade unions began its long (relative) decline, which has continued for almost half a century.

It Didn't Happen Here needs to be supplemented by a fuller account of the 1940s and the 1880s. This should not detract from the authors' great achievement. After their monumental work, not much is left for future scholarship on *Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. Nevertheless, the comparison with other Anglophone societies could be advanced further. We need parallel treatment of developments in the United States (perhaps focusing on a few states) and another society, which attends closely to periodization. Robin Archer is now completing such a comparison with Australia. One hopes for a similarly detailed comparison with Canada, the nearest society to America: as we have seen, it too was 'exceptional' until the 1930s.

Another dimension of comparison has yet to be explored. The literature on exceptionalism treats the labor movement as *sui generis*, and assumes that class is naturally the axis of modern politics. In reality, the labor movement was only one of several social movements which shaped modern politics. Temperance and the women's movement were enormously significant in the early twentieth century. These other movements, to be sure, have not generally created new parties that realign electoral politics. In America, there has been one exception: the abolitionist movement. This emerged as a formidable force in the 1830s, despite considerable repression. In the following decade it challenged Democrats and Whigs by contesting elections in the North, under the banner of the Liberty and then Free-Soil party. This so destabilized the two-party system that the northern Whigs eventually united with the opponents of slavery to form the Republican party in the mid 1850s. Within three decades, abolitionism realigned politics around the issue of slavery—just as the labor movement elsewhere was to realign politics around the axis of class. Why did it succeed, while the American labor movement repeatedly failed? This comparison would surely provide fresh insight.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, socialism has failed everywhere. Marx has finally been proved right, though not in the way he envisaged: "The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future." Tony Blair's Labour Party is made over in the image of Bill Clinton's Democratic party. This

convergence should not be exaggerated. As Lipset and Marks point out, leftist parties in other countries had built a permanent monument: the welfare state. It has survived their ideological demise. Path dependence ensures that America will remain exceptional. In the future, will politics be aligned once more on the axis of class? Or will another social movement realign politics on a new dimension? Throughout Western Europe, as Lipset and Marks point out, the environmental movement is represented by Green parties in national parliaments and the European parliament. The movement has not achieved such success across the Atlantic. The twenty-first century may have its own variant of American exceptionalism.

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