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Municipal Socialism in the United States

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In the early and mid-1960s, historians began exploring the dimensions of daily working-class life and reexamining "from the bottom up" the social dynamics and political appeals of several indigenous radical movements, including the Socialist Party of America (SP). Concurrently, with the rise of the "new" social history, scholars began applying quantitative methods and social science techniques for a grass-roots understanding of political and social behavior patterns. The published and unpublished output of this new generation of historians has both modified and revised the impressionistic and holistic work of consensus historians, pluralist social scientists, and *déjà vu* ideologues of the Eisenhower era. In its largest compass, Bruce M. Stave's (ed.), *Socialism and the Cities* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975, 212 pp. $13.50) exemplifies many of the exciting historiographical and methodological innovations pioneered in the 1960s.

This anthology is the first extensive treatment of American Socialism at the local and municipal levels. According to James Weinstein's tabulations, Socialists in 1912 alone held "some 1,200 public offices in 340 municipalities from coast to coast, among them 79 mayors in 24 states." During the Socialist Party's "Indian Summer" in the 1930s, three large industrial cities (Bridgeport, Reading, and Milwaukee) with an aggregate population exceeding 835,000 people were governed by SP mayors. Like other GOP and Democratic strongholds, a patchwork of patterns emerged in municipalities with Socialist mayors, councilmen, and strong SP locals during the progressive era and depression decade. Anthologies often suffer from a variety of conceptual defects and this collective enterprise is not without its flaws. The narrow sample of cities selected by editor Stave is disappointing. A community study of Butte, Montana, where SP and Wobbly syndicalist forces clashed, would have been instructive. An essay or two focusing on Midwestern and Western SP railroad centers, mining camps, and rural communities would have been apropos. Comparative studies of European and American Socialist municipalities would have also been fruitful. Despite these shortcomings, the study attempts to tackle an array of major issues: Was the SP a genuine working-class movement? Who were the SP's rank-and-file "Jimmie Higginses" and its mass base in the electorate? Were municipal Socialists "in this world but not of it?" Did SP mayors apply the principles of Socialism to municipal administration? How did SP tactics on the municipal level differ from those of progressive and New Deal reformers? Why did the SP fail to enlist the broad support of urban wage earners? By coping with these questions and by reconstructing American Socialism's hidden heritage on the local and municipal levels, this monograph serves as a valuable starting point for students in the field.

In a brilliant, panoramic overview of rank-and-file Debsian Socialists, James R. Green's "The 'Salesmen-Soldiers' of the *Appeal* 'Army' " dispels several myths frequently encountered in the literature. Contrary to David A. Shannon, the Debsian Socialist movement was anchored to a solid working-class base. Imaginatively drawing his composite of nearly 500 "salesmen-soldiers" of the *Appeal to Reason* "Army" from biographical sketches recorded in *Who's Who in Socialist America* (1914), Green shows that these leading salesmen were concentrated in mining camps, extractive industrial centers, and small cities sprawled throughout the Midwest and Southwest. In this heartland of American Socialism, skilled laborers dominated the ranks of this elite corps of hustlers. (Nationally, however, the *Appeal* "Army" brigade was almost evenly divided between skilled and unskilled wage earners.) In the Midwest and Southwest, many of these skilled workers were middle-aged veterans of

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both the Populist and Prohibition movements. Conversely, the vast majority of yeoman and tenant farmers were not affiliated with the People's Party and became Socialist converts after the founding of the SP in 1901. Contrary to Daniel Bell, these rank-and-filers were not "chiliastic" crusaders, but rather autodidacts who were converted to the Cooperative Commonwealth by reading Socialist popularizations, pamphlets, and newspapers. As Green points out, most of these stellar salesmen were native WASP and "older" immigrant workers. The absence of blacks and "new" immigrants in the *Appeal* "Army" reflected "an inorganic relationship to the movement's white rank-and-file" (p. 37.) Although they were conspicuously active in the SP throughout the trans-Mississippi West, women were not encouraged to enlist in the "Army" and ninety-eight percent of the star soldiers were of male gender. Here Green fails to point out that the "Army's" grass-roots operations were coordinated and directed by Grace D. Brewer (1881–1975) at the *Appeal* plant in Girard, Kansas. According to E. Haldeman-Julius and George Allan England, Brewer was instrumental in mobilizing the "Grand Army of the Revolution" and building it into a popular working-class "institution." Despite this oversight, Green's prosopography is an outstanding contribution to the social history of the progressive era.

Complementing Green's national survey, William C. Pratt's " 'Jimmie Higgins' and the Reading Socialist Community" is an illuminating local study and a model "history from the bottom up." Although he failed to consult local city directories and never clearly identifies the vocations of these rank-and-filers, Pratt has skillfully reconstructed the activities of Reading's "Jimmie Higginses." For this Pennsylvania Dutch community's hard core of "true believers," Socialism was a "complete way of life" (p. 144.) The individual branches of the Reading SP machine provided for the educational and social needs of its members. The SP sponsored picnics and concerts, organized youth groups, published a weekly newspaper, and operated a cooperative store and cigar factory, which produced several brands of stogies, including a "Karl Marx" special. Although women were active in the movement, Pratt notes that Reading's "Jennie Higginses" were "clearly in a subordinate position" (p. 148.) By 1936, Socialism had lost its thrust as a viable political movement in this Pennsylvania Dutch community. Factional battles between old guard and militant activists, Pratt concludes, precipitated the decline of Socialism in Reading. All in all, Pratt has demythologized Ben Hanford's "Jimmie Higgins" and has added a local color dimension to our understanding of American Socialism.

Three of these studies focus on Socialist administrations in Milwaukee, Schenectady, and Bridgeport, where capitalist institutions were never seriously threatened. Sally M. Miller's essay, "Milwaukee: Of Ethnicity and Labor," chronicles the rise and fall of Socialism in Milwaukee under the administrations of Emil Seidel (1910–1912) and Daniel W. Hoan (1916–1940). In this brewery and inland industrial center, Social Democrats stressed local Party autonomy and partnership with organized labor. Oligarchic tendencies emerged from this German immigrant dominated bureaucratic structure and Afro-Americans and "new" immigrants were excluded from the "two-armed" labor movement. In their zeal for ballot box victories, the Social Democratic Party deleted a platform plank prohibiting the granting of franchises to private utility corporations from its modest list of immediate demands. As a result, the Social Democrats dramatically moved away from Socialist tenets. By 1910, municipal corruption had driven civic-minded reformers into the Socialist camp. Following the election of Mayor Seidel, the Social Democrats streamlined city government, utilized "experts" and technocrats (including John R. Commons), ended deficit financing, and instituted a host of other reform measures. Six years later, Dan Hoan was elected Mayor, but the Social Democrats never regained their early buoyancy and enthusiasm. After World War I, Milwaukee Social Democrats formally disavowed their revolution-

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ary goals and remained content with holding public office. Ironically, Miller concludes that "the Socialists epitomized progressive municipal reform more boldly than those who bore the name." This interesting study is marred to some extent by its institutional focus. Although she has marshalled evidence contradicting the tendentious work of the ethno-cultural historical school, Miller glosses over the Populist antecedents of Milwaukee Socialism. Were Milwaukee Social Democrats essentially neo-Populists? Scholars desiring to pursue this question should consult Roger Wyman's provocative article in the *Political Science Quarterly* (Winter 1974–1975) which focuses on urban working-class Populism in Wisconsin. Surprisingly, Miller has also ignored the contributions of Milwaukee's prominent Socialist women activists, notably Meta Berger and Elizabeth H. Thomas.

Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr.'s "Tribune of the People: George R. Lunn and the Rise and Fall of Christian Socialism in Schenectady" surveys municipal Socialism in this Mohawk Valley industrial center through its controversial clerical leader. Elected to office in 1911 and 1915, Mayor Lunn was never a bona fide Marxian Socialist and his charisma and reform zeal attracted many middle-class voters in this graft-ridden city. During his two unconsecutive terms in office, Lunn upgraded the efficiency of government, established a municipally-owned grocery store, farm, and lodging house, and instituted a host of other minor reforms. The Mayor failed to levy higher taxes on the local corporate establishment, General Electric and American Locomotive, and publicly acknowledged that capitalism could not be abolished overnight. Like his Milwaukee comrades, Christian Socialist Lunn never raised the issue of capitalism vs. Socialism to his constituents. He also appointed Democrats to key city posts, alienating many SP stalwarts, including Walter Lippmann (whose criticisms of Schenectady Socialism are reproduced in this study), who considered Lunn too conservative and autocratic. After a series of factional imbroglios, Lunn was expelled from the Party and the SP rapidly passed from the scene as a viable political movement in the city. Although it would be foolish to discount Lunn's charisma and his middle-class electoral base, Hendrickson's biographical focus obscures Schenectady's blue-collar elements. As James R. Green points out, "the twenty-three other Socialists elected with Lunn were all workers, half of them machinists." In addition, enclaves of militant radicals, often affiliated with the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers (UE), survived in Schenectady until the 1950s.

The editor's excellent contribution, "The Great Depression and Urban Political Continuity: Bridgeport Chooses Socialism," amplifies patterns of continuity and fiscal conservatism. From 1933 to 1957, Bridgeport was governed by Mayor Jasper McLevy, a Scotslate roofer and trade union leader. During his dozen terms in office, no major social transformation occurred in this Connecticut industrial center. Efficiency-minded and fiscally frugal, McLevy was no enemy of business and he even supported evictions of the poor. At best, his reformist rule in Bridgeport was a classic example of "sewer Socialism." After World War II, urban blight and demographic changes undercut McLevy's electoral base. According to Stave's computer-assisted analysis, white ethnic voters supported the Scot Socialist at the beginning and conclusion of his administration. They grew old and middle-class with him. Conversely, McLevy failed to attract a new generation of Afro-American and Puerto Rican voters who had moved to Bridgeport in the 1950's. After opposing an urban renewal project and physical redevelopment of the city's central business district, McLevy lost his support within Bridgeport's "Socialist" business community. In 1957, the dynamic but conservative septuagenarian Socialist mayor was swept out of office.

Finally, Garin Burbank and Michael Ebner's studies revolve around municipalities where Socialists

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unsuccessfully campaigned for public office. In his ''Socialism in an Oklahoma Boom-Town,'' Burbank posits that the SP's ''attempt to 'Milwaukeeize Oklahoma City' was foredoomed'' (p. 101.) Unlike Milwaukee, Oklahoma City was a booming small-scale trade and service enterprise complex lacking a factory proletariat, a large immigrant community, and a Socialist trade union movement. More than fifty percent of the local population were natives of the South and Southwest. Thus Oklahoma City was not a congenial turf for Socialism. Even in the wake of a militant streetcar strike in 1911, Socialists could only muster 23 percent of the vote. After the emotions aroused by this strike subsided, the Socialists retained the support of only a handful of voters. With the exodus of building tradesmen during the recession of 1913, the Socialist hope of constructing a political movement sank amid the general collapse of Oklahoma City's building boom.

In his ''Socialism and Progressive Political Reform,'' Ebner argues that Socialists promoted a series of humane reforms in Passaic, New Jersey. Unlike the progressives, Socialists placed high priorities on the problems of this textile and rubber center's heterogeneous ''new'' immigrant community. Yet, ethno-cultural tensions prevailed, circumscribing the formation of class consciousness. Thus the SP never garnered more than 6.1 percent of the vote. Equally significant, both Ebner and Burbank emphasize that Socialists and progressive reformers came to blows over the commission form of government. In Passaic, Oklahoma City, and elsewhere, Socialists vigorously attacked this measure because it eradicated decentralized authority and placed businessmen and professional people firmly in the saddle of local government. According to Ebner and Burbank's voting analyses, the working-class wards and precincts in both cities strongly opposed the commission government concept. In the end, however, the Socialists were routed at the polls by the middle-class and business progressives, effectively eliminating working-class representation within the Passaic and Oklahoma City political arenas.

Students planning to hoe this fertile field would do well to consult the editor's superb bibliographical essay. More local studies of Socialist, Wobbly, Communist, and other working-class organizations are needed before we can arrive at a critical and comprehensive understanding of American radicalism.

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The *Fernand Braudel Center* for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations was recently established at the State University of New York, Binghamton under the directorship of Immanuel Wallerstein. Among the five programs planned by the Center are: ''The Concept and the Practice of Women's Work in Relation to Household Income: The Case of Nineteenth Century America'' and ''Social Bases of the World Socialist Movement, 1873–1913.'' In May an Inaugural Conference was held and considered the Impact of the *Annales* School on the Social Sciences. This summer the Center will begin publications of a journal entitled *Review* and ''committed to the pursuit of a perspective which recognizes the primacy of analysis of economies over long historical time and large space, the holism of the socio-historical process, and the transitory (heuristic) nature of theorizing.'' For information contact the Center, SUNY-Binghampton, N.Y. 13901.

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