

Socialism in America

Harold Meyerson ▪ Winter 2016



Victor Berger, Bertha Hale White, and Eugene V. Debs in 1924 (Library of Congress)

The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History

by Jack Ross

Potomac Books, 2015, 824 pp.

During what had to be the many years that Jack Ross spent researching and writing his 800-plus-page history of the American Socialist Party, it could not possibly have occurred to him that its publication would coincide with a presidential campaign by a self-proclaimed democratic socialist to whom millions of Americans, if the polls are to be believed and the crowds given credence, would rally. The Bernie Boom has taken everyone—Bernie Sanders himself very much included—by surprise.

Yet Berniemanía didn't arrive completely unheralded. The largely positive reception accorded to Occupy Wall Street, the rise of Capital in the Twenty-first Century to best-seller status, the successes of the \$15 minimum-wage campaign, and the emergence of Elizabeth Warren as the leader of the populist progressive wing of the Democratic Party all foreshadowed Sanders' successes on the stump. So did polling that showed Americans under thirty had a more favorable impression of

socialism than they did of capitalism. Add to this mix Sanders's unimpeachable authenticity—his embrace of socialism, his railing at economic injustice, his grumpy grandpa demeanor—and voila! His campaign clearly hit a nerve just waiting to be struck.

When the Sanderista shouting is done, however, what then? Can the Bernie Brigades form some kind of enduring left organization that has greater impact than those that emerged from the campaigns of Howard Dean and Jesse Jackson? Will a significant democratic left organization, on a scale that hasn't been seen since the 1930s, emerge? Or will it split asunder, in the grand, sad tradition of the American left, smashed on the reefs of sectarianism, assimilation into the mainstream, utopianism, orneriness, or just plain confusion?

Readers of Jack Ross's new history won't be surprised by any of these possible outcomes. In Ross's telling—and quite a comprehensive telling it is—the failure of both American socialism and the larger American left is the product of all of the above, a tale of missed opportunities abetted by a lethal dose of government suppression in the years during and after the First World War. Previous histories, most particularly James Weinstein's seminal *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925*, have told the story of the suppression. Ross's distinctive contribution is to tell the tale of the missed opportunities—though when the story reaches the 1930s and the years thereafter, the increasingly idiosyncratic and bizarre filter through which Ross views socialist and American history makes that telling less reliable.

First, however, to Ross's achievements, the greatest of which is the scope and detail of his portrait of socialism in the era of Eugene V. Debs. Secondary leaders who have faded from the American left's memory—figures such as Oscar Ameringer, the folksy leader of the Oklahoma wing of the party; Victor Berger and Meyer London, the two Debs-era congressmen (Berger as the tribune of Milwaukee's stolid, good-government union movement; London as the champion of the Lower East Side's more disputatious garment workers); Morris Hillquit, an Eastern

European immigrant who not only bridged the differences between German and Russian Jews but served as the national party's balance wheel and mediator for three decades; and Kate Richards O'Hare, a leading figure at the party's popular tent encampments that were the socialists' Prairie State alternative to the religious revivals that also swept the region. (French socialist leader Jean Jaurès once invited O'Hare to France to help his party improve its outreach to farmers, but, as Ross points out, what worked in Kansas didn't really work in the Vendée.) Left-leaning millionaires, Harvard men, social-gospel Protestant ministers, Rocky Mountain miners accustomed to violent repression and retaliation, aging former Confederates raging against the banks—the grand mish-mash of tribes who combined to form Debsian socialism are all here, and far too disparate to forge enduring collegiality.

Their differences were starkly revealed at national conventions, which are Ross's meat. It's not through extensive character sketches that we come to know the cast of characters in the American socialist pageant; it's through their involvement in the national party's deliberations and actions. We're given a glance at the achievements of Milwaukee's socialist governments, but not of those of the other several score cities that had socialist mayors in the 1910s. Ross's subject is the party—its election campaigns for president, Congress and mayor; its executive committee agreements and splits; its fissiparous subtendencies; its platforms and position papers; its tendencies' platforms and position papers; the inward- and outward-bound trajectories of prominent members leaving and returning to the fold. (The book concludes with pages and pages of election results; we learn, for instance, that in the socialist highpoint election of 1912, one of the three counties in the nation to give Debs more than 35 percent of the vote was Winn Parish, Louisiana, then the home of the nine-year-old Huey Long.) Ross's is not a social history, not a study of the socialist Jewish women in the garment industry, the cooperative enthusiasts clustered around Job Harriman, the future civil rights leaders schooled by A.J. Muste or the social democrats in the United

Automobile Workers union. It's not a history of American democratic socialist experience. It's a history, just as the title says, of the party.

That still leaves abundant room to recount many of American socialism's high points: the party's avant la lettre support for organizing industrial workers; its consistent opposition to imperial ventures (Berger, elected to Congress in 1910, called for withdrawing U.S. troops sent to keep a wary eye on the Mexican revolution from the border); its advocacy of democratizing constitutional reforms (Berger, again, called for abolishing both the Senate and the Supreme Court); its call for social rights (London, elected to Congress in 1914, advocated comprehensive social insurance—including paid maternity leave, a right still not conferred on American parents). The party's crowning glory incurred the highest cost: its heroic opposition to the First World War, led, of course, by Debs, who in his mid-sixties was sentenced to ten years in prison and served three until pardoned, not for advocating draft avoidance but simply for speaking against the war. The government shuttered party offices and impounded all its mailings (which cut socialists off from the organization save in cities like New York and Milwaukee, where members were clustered so densely that publications could be distributed by hand). Elected officials were expelled from legislative bodies, most prominently Berger, whom the U.S. House of Representatives banished only to have him run and win the special election to take his place, only to be banished yet again. The socialists' opposition commanded substantial support within pockets of the electorate—Hillquit, running for mayor of New York on an antiwar platform, garnered 22 percent of the vote—but the Wilson administration's repressive measures (which, Ross points out, exceeded suppression of war opponents in Britain, France, and Germany) crippled the party.

Ross doesn't have much use for most of the prevailing theories of socialism's marginality. The U.S. electoral system, the relative prosperity that Americans experienced, the racial and national divisions within the working class—these get scant

attention. Ross's choice of culprits comes down to the continual failure of the party to help form something bigger. From its formation in 1901 through its last noticeable presidential campaign (Norman Thomas's sixth) in 1948, the Socialists had a string of opportunities to join up with the populists or with farmer-labor formations. Keir Hardie, the founder of the British Labor Party, urged them to do so in the 1910s, and even Engels, in the late nineteenth century, advised his American comrades to form a labor party—not just a socialist party—of their own.

Ross compares the platforms of the socialists and the populists in the early twentieth century, the talking points of Debs and Southern populist Tom Watson, and demonstrates their striking similarities. In 1924, the socialists saw so much of their platform embraced by Robert La Follette's Progressive Party presidential campaign that they joined in—but despite Hillquit's pleadings, neither La Follette nor his fellow Progressives wanted to keep the party going once the election had passed. Throughout the rest of the 1920s and into the '30s and even the '40s, socialists were involved in efforts to form on a national scale a Farmer Labor Party like the one that governed Minnesota, but such efforts came to naught. The socialists themselves were often divided on these efforts, with some members fearing a loss of doctrinal clarity and mission, despite the fact that in the cities where the left came to power, it was almost always under the aegis of a labor party (as in early-twentieth-century San Francisco) or with the backing of a united labor movement (as in Milwaukee) or of a progressive anti-machine fusion movement (as in LaGuardia's New York). Indeed, Ross argues that the “original sin” of American socialism preceded the 1901 formation of the Socialist Party: it was Debs's decision in 1896 not to run as the Populist Party's presidential candidate. (The party then went on to endorse the Democrats' nominee, William Jennings Bryan.)

Had they fused at the turn of the twentieth century, could the socialists and populists have built something bigger? Quite possibly. Could they have stayed fused? That's by no means

clear. Despite a common antipathy to Wall Street capitalism and U.S. imperialism, the tensions that existed within the Socialist Party between its populist rural wing and its immigrant and urban centers were real. (At one national convention, Berger attacked his Okie comrades as a bunch of hayseeds.) They would become even more real as the Second World War loomed. Ross believes the socialist project would have flourished had it formed a farmer-labor party that more fully embraced the distinct populism and isolationism of Middle America—but, as we shall see, that's a judgment compromised by Ross's infatuation with the populism and isolationism of mid-twentieth-century Middle America.

There's no arguing, however, with Ross's clear sympathies for those who sought to root the party in American democratic traditions, and his antipathies towards those whose small-d democratic commitments were wanting. No one has better conveyed the absurdity of Leon Trotsky's talk to American socialists on the course they should follow, which he delivered to comrades in Brooklyn in 1917, on the second day of his only sojourn to the United States. (He was to return to Russia two months later, following the fall of the czar.) Though the Socialist Party had already come out in flat opposition to the war, a stance that mirrored that of the European far left, in Trotsky's eyes, it was still not a revolutionary party. The proper role of socialists, he argued, was to take over the party and convert it to an insurrectionary instrument. (Indeed, the Socialists' engagement in the democratic and non-insurrectionary institutions of American politics was later to lead Trotsky to chastise the party as a collection of Babbitts.) Ross sees Trotsky's fresh-off-the-boat evening in Brooklyn as the spark that lit the American Communist flame: "Trotsky succeeded in converting the most marginal segment of the American socialist movement to his prejudices, based entirely on experiences completely foreign to the American scene."

Part of Ross's mission is to dim the benign glow in which some historians continue to bathe the Communist Party, or at least its efforts to organize unions and promote civil rights. Ross

questions—that's putting it mildly—whether those endeavors outweigh the Communists' efforts to thwart the emergence of an American left they could not control, or at least heavily influence. One such effort—and an indigenous one, preceding by several years Stalin's command to label socialists as fascists—was the 1924 presidential campaign of party leaders William Z. Foster and Benjamin Gitlow, which targeted neither the Democrats nor Republicans but the Robert La Follette Progressives as “the forces of American fascism, complete from Hearst to Debs.” Ross argues that the Socialists' impact on America was ultimately greater than the Communists' (he doesn't have to argue in favor of the Socialists' moral superiority), though by corralling much of that left within the justly doomed orbit of communism, it's by no means clear that the Communists' impact wasn't ultimately, and disastrously, greater.

Trotsky was particularly contemptuous of Hillquit, but it was Hillquit's genius at mediation and compromise and his steady determination to build a vibrant American socialist movement that kept the party from flying apart. (Debs and Thomas brought people into the party; Hillquit kept them—at least, in groups—from leaving.) When Hillquit died suddenly in the fall of 1933, at the very moment that the coming of the New Deal posed an entirely new challenge to the party's viability, the Socialists lost their gyroscope. And it's with Hillquit's death that Ross's history also goes off the rails.

Ross recounts in detail the pressures that the near collapse of American capitalism and the emergence of Rooseveltian liberalism exerted on the various factions of the Socialist Party, but fails to understand the story he's telling. While he identifies “six distinct factions” in the early 1930s party, there's more to heaven and earth than those factions. In particular, there are generations—for the splits he documents were more generational than ideological—in many ways prefiguring the better-known rift between the New Left and Old in the 1960s. At the depth of the Depression, young party members known as the Militants championed, well, militance—some indulging in

revolutionary rhetoric at times—in reaction not only to the near collapse of capitalism but also to the competition and seeming panache of the Communists. Aging Debs-generation stalwarts, known as the “Old Guard,” seemed energized less by the challenge of the Depression than by the challenge of combating the Militants. Norman Thomas, the party’s brilliant and charismatic standard bearer, had succeeded Hillquit as its chairman (a position Debs had shrewdly never held), and proved unequal to the impossible task of bridging the gap between the two generations.

Ross finds the Militants not only ideologically untrustworthy but fickle and perfidious: by 1935–36, some were recasting themselves as New Deal Democrats, and, worse yet, by the late 1940s, many were among the key founders of the official organization of Democratic Party liberalism, Americans for Democratic Action. Just as problematic, it wasn’t just the Militants who moved toward Roosevelt, it was also the Socialists’ institutional anchors in the labor movement, the heavily Jewish, New York-based garment and clothing unions. During the first two years of Roosevelt’s presidency, some on the left feared that under the National Recovery Act (NRA), FDR was moving the nation towards fascism. The unions certainly didn’t fear this, since under the NRA they gained the right to collectively bargain—hardly a feature of fascist regimes. What persuaded not just the unions but the Militants and others to move into Roosevelt’s column was his leftward turn in 1935–36, marked by the enactment of Social Security, the National Labor Relations Act, and more progressive taxation. In Ross’s view, however, FDR’s turn left scarcely rates mention, and his presidency never fully escapes the taint of incipient fascism and pent-up imperialism. Ominously, Ross notes that the “‘blue eagle’ [the symbol of the NRA] was far more ubiquitous and omnipresent in America than the swastika had yet become in Germany”—as if this were any kind of metric for measuring a descent into fascism. Summing up the New Deal, he writes, “The United States was not immune from the trend toward monopolization of political power that ravaged Europe in the

1930s.”

But then, Ross’s fascist, or quasi-fascist, Geiger counter is decidedly on the blink. As the Norman Thomas socialists continued to demand that the New Deal enact more fundamental reforms of capitalism, Ross labels such despicable figures as Father Charles Coughlin, the anti-Semitic radio priest, as potential Socialist allies—lamenting that Coughlin was only later “thrust” into bigoted demagoguery.

As the Second World War loomed, many former party members and a disproportionate number of onetime Militants had become pro-interventionists, while Thomas and his own core of largely young idealists (my own parents included)—fearing a repeat of the kind of pointless slaughter and homefront repression that had descended during the First World War—saw only another imperialist bloodbath looming. This was as principled a set of disagreements as history can yield, but Ross sees in the interventionists only a lust for power and, reading forward, a foreshadowing of the Cold War. His characterization of Lend-Lease—the Roosevelt administration policy to provide out-of-commission destroyers and other supplies to Britain in 1941, when it stood alone against Hitler—is illustrative. “That so many former SP Militants so firmly took their stand in favor of Lend-Lease,” writes Ross, “without considering any constructive alternative, revealed their fundamental interest to be the aggrandizement of power. This was both the inheritance of their 1930s Communist fellow travelling and a defining feature of the Cold War liberalism they were beginning to invent.” What that “constructive alternative” might have been—a separate peace between Britain and Nazi Germany?—Ross doesn’t stipulate.

Ross casts not just Thomas’s campaign to keep the United States out of the war but the efforts of America First and Charles Lindbergh in the most positive of lights. Either his research failed to uncover, or he simply neglects to report, the misgivings that many of Thomas’s closest associates during this period, including party executive secretary Harry Fleischman, expressed in hindsight about their misreading of

how the war would unfold both in Europe and on the home front. (Though Thomas's fears of domestic repression were borne out in the internment of Japanese-Americans, which Thomas, heroically and almost alone among American public figures, opposed—both the ACLU and the Communists were painfully slow to acknowledge the outrage.)

Ross's affinity for anti-liberal isolationists doesn't stop with America First. His animus against the liberal establishment is such that he criticizes a 1961 Socialist Party pamphlet about the Goldwater-era right because it "sought to enlist the Socialist Party as shock troops to extend the growing public hysteria about groups like the John Birch Society." Pass over the question of whether opposition to the Birchers should be labeled "hysteria" and ponder whether Ross's own politics have colored his judgments about the repeated synergies he claims to see between the American democratic socialist tradition and what we might term the Pat Buchanan right.

The final third of Ross's book is by far the strangest. Strictly speaking, a book focusing on the national party's major campaigns might end in 1948, with the last of Thomas's six campaigns for president. But Ross chugs ahead to tell the tale of the party's successor organizations after it split into three separate organizations in 1972. The reason, I can only surmise, is that for Ross, we can't reach a full understanding of Socialist Party events of 1934 or 1941 until we see their inevitable consequences in 1948, 1980, or 2003. The Militants' fervor for both revolution and power wasn't fully revealed until the onetime social democrats turned neoconservatives urged the invasion of Iraq. Ross's view of history is not that the present is shaped by the past, but that the past is shaped by the present. He makes sure the sins of the grandchildren are visited upon their bubbes and zaydes.

It's when Ross attempts to tell the tale of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC), its successor, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and its leader, Michael Harrington, that his anti-liberal biases completely overwhelm his ability to provide anything resembling a history. I have my

biases on this topic, too: I was very much a Harrington acolyte, and worked closely with him on a number of DSOC projects in the 1970s. As Ross sees it, DSOC and DSA went astray with their concerns for issues beyond those of class (in particular feminism), which stemmed in part from Harrington's unrealistically rosy assessment of the New Class (that is, non-working-class) progressives. Its work in coalition with liberal Democrats was also partly rooted, Ross contends, in Harrington's ambitions to be close to power.

In fact, DSOC's involvement in the Democratic Party was rooted in the same impulse that drove Hillquit and many of his fellow socialists to join forces with labor. American unions, as Harrington wrote in his 1968 book *Toward a Democratic Left*, were a social democratic force within the Democratic Party, and the unions that DSOC worked with and influenced were those that opposed the Cold War manias of the Meany-Kirkland AFL-CIO and sought to make common cause with the newer social movements. Harrington's driving ambition, if we may call it that, was to help repair the rift between those movements (the institutional legacies of the New Left 1960s) and the unions (the institutional legacies of the Old Left 1930s), which he blamed himself for opening at Port Huron in 1962. Throughout the 1970s, Harrington and DSOC played a crucial role reknitting the American left, much as Hillquit had once labored to bind up the Socialist Party. That some of those progressive groups, unions in particular, have weakened since the 1970s hasn't made the third-party option any more plausible, as Bernie Sanders clearly understands.

After combing the archives to find contemporaries' assessments of Debs and Thomas, of their luminous charisma as speakers, of their ability to persuade listeners to join them in transforming the world, Ross offers no assessments whatsoever of Harrington's comparable charisma, of his matchless ability to combine intellectual argument with moral force, which is what drew people to DSOC just as it had been Debs's and Thomas's abilities that drew people to the Socialist Party. It's not that such assessments would be hard to find:

thousands of DSOCers, DSAers, and other progressives active in the 1970s and '80s (Harrington died in 1989) are scattered across the land, hundreds of them are in unions, left-of-center think tanks, community organizations, and political groups; most of them are easy to find. In Ross's list of sources, which includes hundreds of books, articles and archives, there are, however, just nine interviews, only two of them with DSOC members. A few more interviews might not only have given him a more balanced view of DSOC and Harrington but spared him from the factual errors that pop up in the book's closing section. In his critique of Harrington and DSOC's politics, Ross asserts that they lacked an "abiding socialist perspective to distinguish DSOC from organized liberalism." That's a critique, though, that's been leveled at social democracy ever since Eduard Bernstein told his German comrades to focus on incremental reforms rather than the chimera of revolution. At the height of Norman Thomas's 1932 presidential campaign, which was to win roughly 900,000 votes, the leftwing journalist Harry Elmer Barnes wrote, "It would be hard to prove Norman Thomas a more advanced person in his social and economic views than a realistic liberal like Amos Pinchot." Today, it's just as hard to discern any programmatic differences between socialist Bernie Sanders and liberal Elizabeth Warren.

But get past the admittedly broad-left programs of a Harrington, a Bernstein, and a Sanders, and there remains a socialist difference, even if it's chiefly analytical. What socialists see that most liberals don't is that the fundamental problem is capitalism—a dynamic unsocial system that, as Harrington predicted in the mid-1970s, when the American mixed economy and broadly shared prosperity were taken as permanent *faits accomplis*, would seek to roll back the nation's semi-demi-welfare state in its pursuit of profit. In the class war, there was no such thing as a permanent equilibrium. "We have to go as far beyond Roosevelt as Roosevelt went beyond Hoover," Harrington once said, "or we're going back to Hoover." That's socialism as prophecy, the kind of clear-eyed, long view of capitalism that historically grounded socialism provides. We

must hope, in the wake of the Sanders campaign, that such perspectives, and the actions that flow from them, take root on American soil.

Harold Meyerson is executive editor of the American Prospect and an op-ed columnist for the Washington Post.