Progressive America: How Labor Parties Failed to Develope in the United States Compared to its European Counterparts.

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for

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The question, why has there been no electorally viable labor party in the United States, addresses ideocratic lens of American exceptionalism throughout its history. Why is the United States the only industrialized nation that never had an electorally viable socialist or labor party compared to its equally developed European counterparts? During the nineteenth and twenty centuries, other developed countries have, to some degree, labor or socialist influence in the extra-parliamentary apparatus of politics. The fact that the United States' unique political apparatus does not mean that it is different from other countries. There are many answers, but basically, two seem most important. The most salient interpretation is culture, involving assumptions that the American value system and the transformative shift in American politics and socio-economic affairs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It follows upon Tocqueville's analysis of what the United States is about. Social mobility, the ability of the people to move up in the social strata, has been a deep-rooted value system in American society ever since the Revolution and to some extent even before. This value, of course, was produced uniquely by itself.

Interdisciplinary in scope, the reader will recognize the central problems of political economy and political philosophy: how to organize society so as to promote the production of wealth and eradicate poverty, and how to arrange it so as to make it a just social order. According to philosopher Karl Marx, Socialism will be a society in which the things we need to live, work and control our own lives—the industries, services and natural resources—are collectively owned by all the people, and in which the democratic organization of the people within the industries and services is the government.[1] Gulf between "haves" and "have nots" growing larger due to the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution, as described, "in

[1] Michael Kazin, Rebecca Edwards, and Adam Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History, (Two Volume Set)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2010), 757-758.

political history these decades carry a pejorative connotation that persisted […] broadly speaking, the Gilded Age is regard as a time when politicians failed to engage in issues of industrialism, urbanization and agricultural discontent."[2] Large, monopolistic corporations begin to replace single-owner business/partnerships with limited capital. Unfettered Competition festered in the form of monopolization. The working-class toiled long hours in factories in unsafe environments and without social safety nets to support them.[3]

The size of the United States' workforce was registered around twenty-four million in 1900 with those aged ten and above reporting a gainful occupation.[4] Over the course of the twentieth century, the composition of the labor force shifted from industries dominated by primary production occupations, such as farmers and foresters, to those dominated by unskilled or semi-skilled factory workers in urban centers.[5] At the turn of the century, about thirty-three percent of the labor force worked on farms. By the end of the century, that figure was less than three percent. Likewise, the percent who worked in goods-producing industries, such as mining, manufacturing, and construction, decreased from thirty-one to nineteen percent of the workforce. Service industries were the growth sector during the Twentieth Century, jumping from thirty-one percent of all workers in 1900.[6] Around the years 1880s-1900, the conditions and increasing social destitution of the working-class would be ripe for a popular workers' revolution to overthrow the ruling bourgeoisie system.[7] However, no such popular revolution occurred in the

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[2] Michael Kazin, Rebecca Edwards, and Adam Rothman, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History, (Two Volume Set)*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2010), 371.
[3] Nick Fischer, Spider Web: *The Birth of American Anticommunism*, (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 1-2.
[4] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Bicentennial Edition: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, (Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1975), 127.
[5] Shackel, Paul A. *Archaeology of American Labor and Working-Class Life. American Experience in Archaeological Perspective*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009, pp. 1-104, 19-20.
[6] U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Bicentennial Edition: Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, (Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1975), 138.
[7] Shackel, Paul A. *Archaeology of American Labor and Working-Class Life. American Experience in Archaeological Perspective*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009, pp. 1-104, 58.

United States, while several small-scale communist revolts occurred in Europe at the end of the First World War.

To fully understand the concept of "laborism" and its political construction, it is important to understand its origins. The Labor Party was born at the turn of the Twentieth Century out of the frustration of working-class people at their inability to field parliamentary candidates through the Liberal Party, which at that time was the dominant social-reform party in Britain.[8] A notable example, which is an appropriate comparison as the United States and Britain share a common Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere, is the British Labor Party. According to Leighton S. James, history professor for Swansea university, "unions formed a major bloc in the extra-parliamentary party apparatus, which sought to control parliamentary representatives as delegates of the party and underwrote a pragmatic parliamentary-oriented political practice."[9] The Labor Party was formed in 1900, from the previous Independent Labor Party.[10] Its formation was the result of many years of struggle by working class people, trade unionists and socialists, united by the goal of working class voices represented in British Parliament.[11]

To describe the uniqueness of American political ingenuity and societal shifts, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* offered the image of an accomplished and successful democratic regime that was the young United States of America. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, viewed social mobility as one of the main sources of democratic stability in the United States. "No novelty," Alexis wrote, "struck me more vividly during my stay there than the

[8] Reid, J. H. Stewart. "The Condition of England Question." *In The Origins of the British Labour Party*, NED-New edition. University of Minnesota Press, 1955. pp. 3–16, 4-5.
[9] Leighton James, Raymond Markey, and Ray Markey, "Class and Labour: The British Labour Party and the Australian Labor Party Compared," *Labour History*, no. 90 (May 2006): pp. 23–41, 23–24.
[10] Reid, J. H. Stewart. "The Formation of the Labour Alliance." In The Origins of the British Labour Party, NED-New edition. University of Minnesota Press, 1955. pp. 70–88, 87.
[11] PUGH, MARTIN. "The Rise of Labour and the Political Culture of Conservatism, 1890–1945." *History 87, no. 288* (2002): 514–37, 515–16.

equality of conditions."[12] Coming from a society still heavily influenced by its aristocratic heritage, de Tocqueville was astounded at how much equality had become a part of American life. It surprised him to see everyone shaking hands with one another. Alexis marveled, and also worried, about a society where social class did not seem to matter and everyone expected to be treated the same.[13] What matters is how this mobility affects the prospects of the current pivotal decision-makers. In the constant ferment of a free economic system, everything is constantly changing and improving. "America is the only country in which it has been possible to witness the natural and tranquil growth of society, and where the influence exercised on the future condition of states by their origin is clearly distinguishable."[14] People prosper or decline—often to rise again later. Nothing is permanent. Everyone expects improvement.[15] He makes the distinction between America and Europe, outlining that "aristocratic nations are naturally too liable to narrow the scope of human perfectibility; democratic nations, to expand it beyond reason."[16] Thus, the sluggish push for social mobility was predestinated in Europe from the beginning. An idea going back at least to Alexis De Tocqueville relates the emergence of a stable democratic system to an economic structure with relatively high rates of social mobility. De Tocqueville, for example, argued:

> "Amid the constant movement that reigns within a democratic society, the bond that links generations together weakness or breaks; each man easily loses track of the ideas of his ancestors, or is hardly concerned about then. Nor can the men who live in such a society draw their beliefs from the opinions of the class to which they belong, for there are so to

[12] Alexis de Tocqueville, James T. Schleifer, and Eduardo Nolla, *Democracy in America*, Vol. English edition, (Indianapolis: *Liberty Fund Inc*, 2012), 4.
[13] Alexis de Tocqueville, James T. Schleifer, and Eduardo Nolla, *Democracy in America*, Vol. English edition, (Indianapolis: *Liberty Fund Inc*, 2012), 44–45.
[14] *Ibid*, 47.
[15] *Ibid*, 759–761.
[16] *Ibid*., 762.

speak no longer any classes, and those that still exist are composed of elements so fluid, that the corps can never exercise a true power over its members."[17]

We may also look from a historical materialistic perspective concerning the uniqueness of American political and socio-economic affairs. The general understanding of the United States in Marx's historiographic vision is fairly straightforward, however. The American Revolution was, akin to its counterpart in France, a bourgeois revolution, which had the social aim of overthrowing the feudal-aristocratic order and imposing the rule of the capitalist middle classes, or in Marxist terminology the bourgeoisie. What made the American Revolution special for Marx, however, was that feudalism had no real roots in America in the first place—it was "subordinate to bourgeois society" from the very beginning; this, combined with the fact that America was a whole new continent available for exploitation, allowed the bourgeoisie to "develop to hitherto unheard-of dimensions".[18] Additionally, Marx argued that class consciousness—and thus the potential for class mobilization and class-based conflict—in the United States is low because "though classes, indeed, exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in a constant state of flux"[19] The conundrum remains. Although the United States is the most productive industrialized nation, it has never had a viable left-wing, working-class party.

However, the prospects for labor parties declined quickly in the United States after their rapid ascent in Europe, a reversal that Marx never confronted or explained. One source of the movement's failure was taking up of some of its most popular demands by one of the old parties. De Tocqueville travels through the United States during an election allowed him to observe a

[17] *Ibid*, 700.
[18] Karl Marx, "Bastiat and Casey," in *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Books in association with *New Left Review*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus, (New York, 1973), 802.
[19] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon,* Project Gutenberg, (New York: International, 1852), 9.

"constant agitation of parties," each attempting to draw voters over to its side.[20] Small parties, on the country, are generally without political faith. Tocqueville describes small parties as meager, unable to shape national politics since they "do not feel elevated and sustained by great objectives, their character is stamped by an egoism that occurs openly in each of their acts. They worked up from a cold start; their language is violent, but their course is timid and uncertain."[21] Tocqueville puts emphasis on the "large parties" that can completely turn a society upside down.[22] "In America the two parties agreed on the most essential points. Neither of the two had, to succeed, to destroy an ancient order or to overthrow the whole of a social structure."[23] "Great" parties in America, unlike those in Europe, according to Alexis, were thus not confronted with considerable social and political obstacles. Nonetheless, they were still "great" parties; they struggled over immaterial interests of the highest order, the fundamental principles of the regime, equality and liberty. Both parties in America were attached to democratic government. Therefore the struggle grew out of the dispute over the meaning and ways in which the founding principles were to shape the form of government and type of society to be produced. Some elements within the Democratic and Republican parties responded to the electoral successes of progressive and populist agendas by showing greater concern than ever before for the various reform provisions for the common American. Although relatively strong in many local contests, the parties, like many subsequent efforts of minor left parties in America, proved unable to deal with the "presidential question"—the possibility that by nominating their own candidate, they would draw votes away from the more left-disposed major party nominee. Afterward, the first years of the

[20] Alexis de Tocqueville, James T. Schleifer, and Eduardo Nolla, *Democracy in America*, Vol. English edition, (Indianapolis: *Liberty Fund Inc*, 2012), 474–76.
[21] Alexis de Tocqueville, James T. Schleifer, and Eduardo Nolla, *Democracy in America*, Vol. English edition, (Indianapolis: *Liberty Fund Inc*, 2012), 279–80.
[22] *Ibid*, 281.
[23] *Ibid*, 282.

new century that followed were dominated by progressivism, a forward-looking political movement that attempted to redress some of the ills that had arisen during the Gilded Age.[24] Progressives passed legislation to rein in big business, combat corruption, free the government from special interests, and protect the rights of consumers, workers, immigrants, and the poor.

Aside from being an exception, America was actually the model for capitalist countries, seeking to provide a haven while fair and progressive safe havens for the common people. European socialists could see in America the image of their own unhappy future. Far from being a unique or even only slightly different case, America was the prototype for capitalism. In a curious reversal of roles, the American labor never did achieve a broad ideal of class-consciousness envisioned by Karl Marx. While the Gilded Age proved to be an ideal breeding ground for a greater American socialist-labor movement, early volatile confrontations with law enforcement, disunity and infighting within the movement regressed it into a debilitated version from its European counterparts across the Atlantic. The subsequent rise of the Progressive Era proved to weaken the American labor movement's chances for political participation, as notable presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson urged comprehensive change in both the economic, political and societal sphere that diluted a "Socialist Dream" for America. And, finally, deep-rooted nativism and Wilson's strong-willed repression on vocal socialist, anarchist and labor institutions proved to be the death knell for meaningful socialist dreams in the United States.

[24] Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Karen Manners Smith. *The Gilded Age & Progressive Era: A Student Companion*. Oxford Student Companions to American History. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 134; 138–139.

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