Why Did the Socialist Movement Fail in the United States?

There are many arguments that explain why the United States has been less conducive to radicalism and socialism than any other advanced industrial nation. One explanation focuses on the relatively egalitarian character of American life. American society lacked the sharply defined pre-industrial social groups—aristocrats, peasants, guilds—which gave European society intense class consciousness. Indeed, a lack of class consciousness continues today. Throughout American history, Americans have rarely defined themselves as "workers."

Adult white male workers were "born free"—that is, they possessed the vote from the early nineteenth century. In Europe, it was the working-class struggle for the vote that laid the foundation for socialist parties. American workers never had to struggle for the right to vote. Also in sharp contrast to Europe, there were no formal barriers to educational opportunity or economic mobility. The illusion of mobility proved to be a powerful force undercutting the appeal of radicalism.

A second explanation explains the weakness of radicalism in the United States as affluence, the so-called "roast beef and apple pie" explanation. American workers' standard of living was much higher than that in most European countries. Still, it must be emphasized, most American workingmen and women combined low wages and long hours.

Another explanation involves the nature of the American working class. Despite the early timing of American industrialization, the United States was one of the last countries to develop a permanent native born male factory work force. During the nineteenth century, American industry relied upon teenagers, unmarried women, and immigrants. American society appeared to be divided along the supposedly "natural lines of age, gender, and ethnicity rather than class.

The widespread acceptance of the "American" ideology of individualism, democracy, and opportunity has also undermined the appeal of radicalism. Americans have rarely been willing to define themselves as workers. Even radicals have traditionally been hostile toward bureaucracies and institutions, making it difficult for radical movements to maintain themselves over time.

Material prosperity, social mobility, the division of the working class into conflicting ethnic groups, and the inhospitality of the political system to third parties have all contributed to the weakness of radicalism in America.

It is not true, however, that the United States never had a vigorous socialist movement. Early in this century, a broad-based socialist movement flourished, attracting support from Oklahoma tenant farmers and miners, lumberjacks from the Pacific North West, Texas populists, Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants in New York, radical members of the International Workers of the World, and many German Americans living in Wisconsin. The movement had an eloquent, charismatic leader named Eugene V. Debs, who strong made a strong religious appeal to many native-born Protestants. In the 1912 election, the Socialist party polled nearly six percent of the Presidential vote and elected 1,200 socialists to office, including one Congressman and 79 mayors. Two million subscribers received some 323 socialist publications.

And yet by 1921, the American Socialist party had largely disappeared, swept into the dust bin of history along with other extinct political parties, such as the Anti-Masons, the Know-Nothings, and the American Independent Party.

What happened? The answer lies in World War I. The party denounced American intervention in the war as "a crime against the people" and called for opposition to the military draft. The party's antiwar position generated support from many Americans of German ancestry, but the government response was swift and stern. "Disloyalty," Woodrow Wilson had promised, "will be dealt with the firm hand of repression." Eugene Debs was imprisoned along with Victor Berger, a Socialist congressman from Milwaukee. The government jailed or deported the party's first and second rank leadership, banned socialist publications, raided party headquarters, and broke up socialist meetings.

Ironically, the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia created additional problems. Prior to 1917, there was no actual example of a communist or socialist state. Socialism was an idea open to experiment and redefinition. After 1917, there was a concrete example of socialism in the world, and many individuals were put off by what they saw. Increasingly, party discipline, centralization of authority, and doctrinal rigidity were the values associated with socialism.

The success of the Russian revolution also accelerated a split between English-speaking and foreign language members of the Socialist party. Many Slavic immigrants, enthusiastic over the Russian Revolution, joined the socialist party, but many native-born Americans, particularly those from the Southwest, dropped out. The result was that the party lost its broad-based, heterogeneous character. In 1912, only fifteen percent of the party were foreign born. By 1919, immigrants made up a clear majority.

It was during the 1920s that the socialist left acquired the features that have characterized it until this day: division into narrow factions and hostile sects. Today, the largest American radical party, the American Communist Party, consists of just 2,400 members. The second largest, the Socialist Workers Party, has just 1,800 members.