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# Rediscovering Revolutionary Socialism in America: The Marxism of Victor Berger at the Height of the Second International*


## Abstract

This article examines the pre-World War I editorials of America's first Socialist congressman, Victor Berger, in order to recover the lost history of early twentieth-century American socialism from the obscuring lenses of Progressivism, Populism, anarchism, scientism, Soviet Communism, and American Exceptionalism. As I argue, talk of a Second Gilded Age today overlooks the vastly different roles "socialism" has played in the respective discourses. Rather than fighting for a stronger national welfare state, even the most conservative Socialists like Wisconsin Representative Victor Berger campaigned for the abolition of wage labour and the overthrow of global capitalism. Recognizing Populism's failure to preserve its political independence as a working-class movement, Berger, like Debs, proposed that the working class should organize itself under the banner of a socialist party to take state power. In order to link the formation of mass parties like the Socialist Party of America to a totalizing philosophy of history and international political revolution, Berger drew from Second-International Marxist dialogue in which it was enmeshed, not indigenous American traditions. The prolific editorial career of Victor Berger, head of the largest English-language socialist daily in the country, demonstrates how pre-war American Socialists did not merely "translate" Second-International Marxism but rather made up a constitutive part of its transatlantic development.


Keywords: *socialism*; *Victor Berger*; *Second International*; *American socialism; Socialist Party of America; capitalism; Marxism; philosophy*

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Our contemporary moment is often dubbed the "New Gilded Age," but the parallel is hardly precise. Today, while young people feel as positively about "socialism" as they do about "capitalism," economic woes have mainly inspired calls for a more progressive welfare state.[1] By contrast, the original Gilded Age gave rise to massive socialist parties calling for the overthrow of capitalism, through armed uprising if necessary. While the meaning of "socialism" has varied across historical and geographical contexts, the most neglected and misunderstood socialism is that of its "golden age,"[2] after early nineteenth-century utopian socialism but before twentieth-century "actually existing socialism." This was the era of the Second International (1889–1916), a network of socialist parties across dozens of nations that understood itself as a socialist world government in waiting, not merely a federation of autonomous national parties. The International, having purged theoretical anarchism and adopted Marxism as its official doctrine in 1896, was led by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which by the early twentieth century was the first million-strong party in the world and the leading democratic force in the German Empire.[3] Lesser but still substantial, the Socialist Party of America (SPA) by 1912 boasted around 120,000 members, circulated over 300 socialist newspapers, elected more than a thousand Socialist candidates to office—including Victor Berger as the first Socialist congressperson and seventy-four Socialist mayors across twenty-three states—and secured over 900,000 votes in the national election, or 6% of the popular vote, with their presidential candidate, Eugene V. Debs.[4]

How have historians understood these developments? For the most part, they have followed the assumption underlying Werner Sombart's question in 1906—"Why is there no socialism in the United States?"—namely, that no genuine socialist movement ever appeared on American soil. As for its theoretical character, even the Socialist Party's recent chronicler Jack Ross asserts that "Debs and his movement remained more influenced by the particularly American movements that culminated in Populism than by Marxism."[5] However, in order to explain rapidly destabilizing social developments and embolden reasonable belief in impending revolution, Socialists turned first and foremost to Second-International "Orthodox Marxism." "Orthodox"

1 Lydia Saad, "Socialism as Popular as Capitalism Among Young Adults in U.S.," *Gallup* (25 November 2019), https://news.gallup.com/poll/268766/socialism-popular-capitalism-among-young-adults.aspx (Accessed 26 September 2021).

2 Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, the Golden Age, the Breakdown* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).

3 Andrew G. Bonnell, *Red Banners, Books and Beer Mugs: The Mental World of German Social Democrats, 1863–1914* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1.

4 Leon Fink, *The Long Gilded Age: American Capitalism and the Lessons of a New World Order* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 121–122.

5 Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2015), 40.

Marxism distinguished itself from "revisionist" Marxism by its understanding of capitalism as a self-contradictory crisis of modern society that required political revolution before genuine gradual, progressive social evolution out of capitalism could begin.[6] Historians have obscured the revolutionary Marxist character of the SPA in several ways. Some have assimilated the party to indigenous political movements like Progressivism and Populism. Others have viewed the SPA as an expression of the syndicalist movement that spawned around the same time across industrializing nations. Still others have identified SPA leaders primarily as Darwinians or philosophical pragmatists.[7] Most have projected back categories from the 1917 Russian Revolution and subsequent developments. However, these histories have failed to account for the fact that many Socialist leaders understood themselves to be followers of Marx and were recognized as such by their opponents, including Populists, Progressives, trade unionists, and syndicalists.

How revolutionary were the Debsian Socialists? The preeminent biographer of Victor Berger, Sally Miller, writes:

> [The Socialists] were hardly involved in their society […] they also lacked the option of real responsibility within the American political system. Consequently, the Americans were by circumstances completely at liberty to insist upon orthodox doctrinal purity. They chose to adopt Marxist ideology in position papers and in votes abroad. After all, what possibly could they gain by rejecting Marx?[8]

6 "Orthodox" was first used pejoratively by detractors of Marx' and Engels' "dogmatism" going back to the First International (1864–1876). Karl Kautsky and other SPD leaders eventually adopted the term positively, most notably as a way of disavowing revisionism in the Revisionist Debate.

7 In recent decades, monograph intellectual histories have suggested that Socialist theory, if not absent altogether, reflected an exceptionally American character, particularly in its evangelical, republican, and pragmatist elements. James Kloppenberg, tracing the trans-Atlantic convergence of social democracy and progressivism, treats American history as bereft of socialist party politics and relegates Debs, Berger, and Hillquit to a footnote. Mark Pittenger reconstructs Socialists' intellectual universe as one in which scientism and evolutionary fatalism triumphed over Marxist voluntarism. According to Brian Lloyd, Socialist intellectuals converted Marxism into a positivist and pragmatic philosophy more in line with Thorstein Veblen and Ernst Mach than Karl Marx. James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 459; Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870–1920* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993); Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890–1922* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

8 Sally Miller, "Americans and the Second International," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 120, no. 5 (1976): 380. The insistence that the International's radical discourse amounted to hollow "revolutionary gestures" persists widely today, for example in

Along these lines, historians have generally treated SPA Marxism as disingenuous "rhetoric." However, the accusation of Socialists' superficial revolutionism rests on the basis of what came after 1914—namely, the implosion of the Second International and the ensuing triumph of nationalist welfare-statism over socialism. Historians have naturalized the subsequent demise of the American Marxist tradition and applied it retroactively onto the past, insinuating that because the world socialist revolution failed, it must have never really meant to succeed on its own terms. To the extent that this forgotten tradition is recovered, it gets assimilated to today's narrowed political horizons. Berger is celebrated as the "patron saint" of "Democratic Socialism," a tradition which has "survived,"[9] and Debs is equated with Bernie Sanders.[10]

This paper asks, what would it mean to take the early Socialists at their word, at a time when the growth of political Marxism, in the form of mass socialist parties around the world, appeared as an inexorable development? By reexamining the revolutionary rhetoric and political leadership of SPA co-founder and first Socialist congressperson Victor Berger—the living embodiment of SPA "reformism," according to the historiography—I invite a reconsideration of SPA Marxism on its own terms. Of course, we cannot grasp SPA Marxism without understanding how the party refined its ideology through ongoing engagement with the Second International. Focusing on the years around 1912—the electoral peak for the SPA as well as the German SPD—close readings of Victor Berger's popular editorials, viewed in conjunction with the International's contemporary discourse, will help us uncover the international and revolutionary character of the SPA, during and as an integral part of the highpoint of the Second International movement for socialism.

Richard Schneirov, "Social Democracy, the Mix, and the Problem of the Labor Metaphysic," *Platypus Review* 138 (July/August 2021).

9 Sally Miller, *Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism, 1910–1920* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 252.

10 Shawn Gude, "You Can Have Brandeis or You Can Have Debs," *Jacobin* (19 February 2019), https://jacobinmag.com/2019/02/you-can-have-brandeis-or-you-can-have-debs (Accessed 21 November 2021); Eric Foner, "How Bernie Sanders Should Talk About Democratic Socialism," *The Nation* (21 October 2015), https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/how-bernie-sanders-should-talk-about-democratic-socialism/ (Accessed 21 November 2021). See also Peter Dreier, "Why Has Milwaukee Forgotten Victor Berger?" *Huffington Post* (6 May 2012), www.huffpost.com/entry/why-has-milwaukee-forgott_b_1491463 (Accessed 17 November 2021).

## Victor Berger, Second International Marxist

The case of Victor Berger shows clearly that American socialists were dedicated Marxists, part of a vibrant international movement that distinguished itself sharply from American Progressivism and Populism. Berger, who ran the Social-Democratic Publishing Company in Milwaukee and helped to define the SPA's intellectual and political stance, represented the most widely digestible and politically embedded element of the American socialist movement. Left-wing historians have called Berger a non-revolutionary "reformist" and employed labels such as "right-wing" and "constructivist" to distinguish him from the "left-wing" and "revolutionary" Debs.[11] No doubt, Berger harboured some views that occasionally set him apart from the majority Socialist position, particularly his racism, which had to be subordinated to party discipline more than once. Yet, like Debs, he diverged from contemporary European Marxists less in the content of his thought than in the popular idiom he employed.[12] Berger's corpus reveals matter-of-fact talk about international revolution, class conflict, and the need to arm workers. Like all Second International Marxists, he believed that global capitalism needed to be abolished, not simply modified. Although he viewed reforms more favourably than some Socialist tendencies, he regularly fended off "reformism" by framing reforms as a means to an end—revolution. Like other SPA leaders, he believed that the road map for overcoming capitalism lay in Marx's philosophy of history and critique of political economy. To this end, Berger consistently emphasized the dialectical relationship between capitalism and socialism, the need to subordinate reform to revolution, the centrality of class struggle, the importance of class consciousness, and the call to abolish wage labour.

11 Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897–1912* (New York: Greenwood Press, [1952]1968) remains the seminal left-wing account of the SPA. Much has been written about Berger's role in the SPA, his work in Congress, and his indictments during the war years. Berger's alleged pragmatic, "Weberian" contributions to Socialist politics are elaborated in Miller, *Victor Berger*. On Berger's opposition to the First World War, see Philip M. Glende, "Victor Berger's Dangerous Ideas: Censoring the Mail to Preserve National Security during World War I," *Essays in Economic & Business History* 26 (2008). His trial under the Espionage Act and battle to be seated in Congress are reviewed in Edward J. Muzik, "Victor L. Berger: Congress and the Red Scare," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 47, no. 4 (Summer, 1964). For Berger's idealistic, "pre-modern" approach to running an independent publishing house, see James Kates, "Editor, Publisher, Citizen, Socialist," *Journalism History*, 44:2 (2018): 79–88.

12 Brian Lloyd's high intellectual history of leading Socialist intellectuals gives no extended treatment of Berger, suggesting that he did not consider Berger in this ilk. The fact that Berger wrote no extended works but rather only hundreds of editorials seems to have led intellectual histories to downplay his contributions. Lloyd, *Left Out* (1997).

Berger was born in Austria-Hungary in 1860 to a relatively prosperous Jewish family. After brief enrollments at the University of Vienna and the University of Budapest, at the age of eighteen he and his family immigrated to the U.S., settling down in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which was home to a large German-speaking emigre population of "Forty-Eighters" and an active labour movement. Initially working as a schoolteacher, Berger quickly joined the Socialist Labor Party headed by Daniel de Leon and left teaching to become the editor of two socialist newspapers, *Wisconsin Vorwärts* ("Forward") and *Die Wahrheit* ("The Truth"). In 1895, the year of Friedrich Engels' death, Berger visited the mythic leader of the Pullman Strike and soon-to-be Socialist Party icon, Eugene Debs, during his jail sentence in Woodstock, Illinois, where he lectured Debs on the profundity of Marxism and left him with a copy of *Das Kapital*, converting Debs to Marxism shortly thereafter.[13] Berger and Debs soon helped co-found the Socialist Party of America (1901–1972). By 1910, Milwaukee Socialists were running a model campaign in which Berger's words were distributed in seven languages. They swept the majority of city offices, including Emil Seidel as mayor, Victor Berger as one of seven Socialist aldermen, and Victor's wife Meta Berger on the city schoolboard. Most spectacularly, Berger was elected as the first Socialist representative to Congress, with Rand School founding president William J. Ghent serving as his chief of staff. In terms of temperament, Victor was described by his peers as ambitious, confident and stubborn, and occasionally hot-tempered, though also known for his affectionate devotion to his wife and two daughters, who spoke of his self-deprecating wit and charm.[14]

We know him best for his later trial under the Espionage Act, but during his time in office his main activity was to use his platform to win people over to socialist revolution through unsparing criticism of the capitalist order, exemplifying the intransigent Marxist position of the Second International. The clearest expression of "Orthodox Marxism" came from the Erfurt programme, adopted by the German SPD in 1891, which enshrined Marxism as the official ideological doctrine of the party, and by extension, the International. As its touchstone, Erfurt Marxism put forward an essentially oppositional orientation to capitalist politics, which would never reform itself into socialism. Socialists' main tasks were educational and civil-social: carry the socialist message to the people through ruthless criticism, and organize the working class as an autonomous force in society to eventually take political power. Berger himself was first and foremost a publicist and only incidentally a politician. While the SPA had no official party press at the time, three papers dominated national circulation:

13 See Eugene Debs, "How I Became a Socialist," *Writings and Speeches,* 47. This brief statement first appeared in *The Comrade*, I (April 1902).

14 Morris Hillquit, *Loose Leaves from a Busy Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 53; Kates, "Editor, Publisher, Citizen, Socialist," 81–82; For an abbreviated biography of Victor Berger, see Miller, *Victor Berger*, 17–25.

Berger's *Social Democratic Herald* in Milwaukee, Chicago's *International Socialist Review* run by Berger's intellectual adversary, Charles Kerr, and Julius Wayland's *Appeal to Reason* in Kansas City. In December 1911, Berger's Social-Democratic Publishing Company published its opening issue of its new daily, the *Milwaukee Leader*—whose staff included a young Carl Sandburg—which supplanted the weekly *Social Democratic Herald* by September 1913 and became the largest English-language Socialist daily in the country.[15]

To understand Berger better, we need to start with the fact that he was a dedicated Marxist. While the socialist tradition encompassed a broad variety of anti-capitalist ideologies from the nineteenth century, from anarchism to Lassallean state socialism, Marxism occupied a unique place in the movement, only becoming hegemonic in the decades following Marx's death in 1883. At its Hegelian core, Marxism held that global society was a historical process in which the new constantly cancelled and replaced the old. Accordingly, capitalism was to be understood not as a static economic system but as an epochal category marking a historical crisis of modern "bourgeois society." "Socialism is the name of a phase of civilization," wrote Berger, "just as feudalism was a phase of civilization and as capitalism is the name of the civilization we have now." In typical Erfurt Marxist fashion, Berger defined capitalism as an unsustainable crisis, invoking socialism as the only possible remedy. "Many students of history and of political economy say that Socialism must be the name of the next phase, if civilization is to survive."[16] That is, *humanity* would technically go on without socialism, but—like Friedrich Engels' and Rosa Luxemburg's dictum, "socialism or barbarism"—in a regressive manner. In saying so, Berger was not declaring the next phase of civilization as wholly predetermined and merely a question of *when*. Behind the language of inevitability lay the fact that Second Internationalists genuinely observed the splitting of society into two opposed camps, representing labour and capital. Both mass workers' movements eager for socialist leadership and reactionary anti-socialist alliances were ascending at an unprecedented tempo. Nonetheless, throughout his editorial career, Berger stressed that overcoming capitalism was never inevitable but instead required "continuous and hard work at the present time."[17] Given that "the world's history is always made by men, and is *not a mere* natural process, the idea that because Socialism is bound to come, we do not have to work for it, would be fatalistic, and might prove fatal to civilization," wrote Berger, paraphrasing Marx's maxim.[18]

15 James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 84–102.

16 Berger, "The Meaning of Socialism—As Summed Up by Victor L. Berger," *Social Democratic Herald (SDH)*, 7 June 1913, 1.

17 Berger, "Give Them Hope," *SDH*, 14 October 1911, 1.

18 Berger, "How to Make the Change," in *Berger's Broadsides, 1860–1912* (Milwaukee: Social-Democratic Publishing Co, 1912), 244, republished in the *SHD* as "Socialism, The Next

Believing that party propaganda should concentrate on "simple realities that anyone could grasp," Berger spent much of his time articulating in the American vernacular key ideas from Second-International Marxist discourse. To link wage labour with the universal exploitation of workers, Berger clarified that money-capital was simply surplus labour in a form that could be exchanged for the purchase of more surplus labour. "Our ruling class says that all wages come from capital. The contrary is true; all modern capital comes from wages that have not been paid."[19] Moreover, he contextualized the interrelated absurdities of over-production and unemployment within the self-destructive core of capitalist production. "The workingmen, on account of their numbers, are the main consumers in every nation, and, not having received the full value of their products—it is clear to see that they cannot buy back this production with their wages. Thus, an artificial over-production is created every year." He continued, "Now, this over-production really means an under-consumption, because the working class cannot consume as much as it should." Why? "The capitalist system is based upon a certain number of workingmen being unemployed at all times," in order "to create a reserve army of the unemployed and to keep down wages." As a result, "not all the goods that have been produced are sold […] This finally results in an industrial crisis (or panic, as it is called) at regular intervals."[20]

In order to unpack Marx's treatment of "estranged" labour as the fundamental self-contradiction of capitalism, Berger pointed to the debasement of labour in Gilded Age America. "A man is not free who is dependent upon another for a job—for a chance to make a livelihood," wrote Berger.[21] In post-Reconstruction America, the labour question had replaced the slavery question, as wage labour no longer operated

Epoch of Society," *SHD*, 9 March 1912, 1; Berger, "Are Socialists Practical?" *SDH*, 25 November 1911, 1; Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Section I, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, [1963]1978), 595. Pittenger explains that pragmatist castigations of Socialists as intransigent utopians, like Daniel Bell's, overlook their genuine belief in the imminence of socialist revolution, which arose from what they understood to be rational, scientific knowledge. Pittenger, *American Socialists*, 5. Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, [1952] 1967).

19 Berger, "Labor Day Greetings," *SDH*, 30 August 1913, 1.

20 Berger, "Capitalistic and Jesuitical Politics," *SDH*, 25 March 1911, 1. Louis Boudin's *The Theoretical System of Karl Marx* (1907), a breakthrough among American contributions to socialist theory, was the first English-language original work to expound on a crisis theory of American capitalism. Paul Buhle, "Intellectuals in the Debsian Socialist Party," *Radical America* 4, April 1970, 39.

21 Berger, "Socialism and Liberty," *SDH*, 30 September 1911, 1. Anthony Esposito's monograph, which focuses on Socialists' conception of class struggle, characterizes SPA ideology as the marriage of formal Marxism and informal American republican egalitarianism, rejecting their alleged mutual exclusivity. Anthony V. Esposito, *The Ideology of the Socialist Party of America, 1901–1917* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 3–4.

as a temporary road to economic independence but as a "proletarian" condition of fixed dependency on unstable and exploitative employment.[22] Berger spelled out the historical degeneration of "free labour" into "wage labour" in the capitalist era, touching on the complex overlapping relationship between liberal thought and Marxism. Unlike the twentieth-century dichotomy of liberalism and Communism, contemporary Marxists understood the difference between liberal republicanism and proletarian socialism as historical, not as a clash between two ideal-types. For them, liberalism was a radical leftist tradition of the eighteenth century that had been undermined by the industrial capitalism of the nineteenth century, which rendered liberalism insufficient, if however still necessary, for the problems posed by capitalism. As Berger saw it, "Democracy went into bankruptcy in the service of capitalism."[23] That is, "while we have a democracy in name, we live in a plutocracy *in fact* (*sic*)."[24] After all, "private capital, which was formerly a means of progress, is now impeding progress," since "collective capital, especially as organized in the trusts and big corporations, has practically nullified most of the advantages of political democracy."[25] Socialists maintained that political democracy could be achieved without necessarily touching the "social question" capitalism posed. "What is the difference between a republic and a monarchy as far as the condition of the masses is concerned?" asked Berger. "Whether he has political rights or not, does not, per se, improve his condition in life. But whether he be poor or rich does most materially affect his condition,"[26] wrote Berger, echoing Engels' retort to French socialist Paul Lafargue, "Your republic and our monarchies are all one in relation to the proletariat."[27] In a peculiar sense, Socialists saw themselves as upholding liberal desiderata better than liberals themselves, both in defending civil liberties against the capitalist state more vehemently, as well as recognizing dialectically that the bourgeois liberal ideal—freedom from political coercion—could not be achieved without socialist revolution.

Berger's dialectical treatment of the key issues of trusts, party, and class exemplified the Erfurt Marxism at the core of his writings. According to the Marxian-Hegelian concept of dialectics, historical change developed as a series of successive conflicts,

22 Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), xxxvi.

23 Berger, "A Confession of Their Utter Bankruptcy as Parties," *SDH*, 4 February 1911, 1.

24 Berger, "Democracy Must become Social-Democracy," *SDH*, 23 March 1912, 1, an elaboration of "The Form of Government Is of Little Consequence" (September 1909), in *Broadsides*, 222–227.

25 Berger, "Socialism is Not Communism," *SDH*, 23 December 1911, 1.

26 Berger, "Which Do We Want—A Constitutional Fetich or Majority Rule?" *SDH*, 29 April 1911, 1.

27 Engels to Paul (17 June 1893), in Friedrich Engels, Paul Lafargue and Laura Marx Lafargue, ed. Emile Bottigelli, *Correspondence [of] Frederick Engels [and] Paul and Laura Lafargue* (*ELC*) vol. 3 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1959), 271–2.

or, "self-contradictions," within the social totality, which eventually come to a head in acute eruptions that introduced a qualitatively different totality. Following Marx, Berger viewed the onset of capitalism as not simply a tragedy but rather the necessary precondition for a higher phase of civilization, socialism. Invoking dialectics, he dispelled the false binary of affirmative versus contrarian positions toward particular historical developments. For instance, Berger insisted that the late nineteenth-century development of trusts, or, multinational corporate monopolies, simply represented an indelible advancement of capitalist society, which explicitly pointed to the need for socialism.[28] Progressives like "trust-buster" Theodore Roosevelt and Wisconsin Senator Robert M. La Follette wanted to break up the massive trusts in order to ensure the primacy of "petty bourgeois" small business. Meanwhile, the official position of the SPA, stemming from Berger's proposed legislation, demanded that the federal government purchase any trust that controlled more than 40 % of its industry—along with all railways, coal mines, and telephone and telegraph companies—in order to render unnecessary a militant socialist confiscation of the economy. For Berger, the trusts represented not the cause but rather "the natural outcome of the capitalist system." Seeing as trusts promoted "concentration instead of division, co-operation instead of competition," they were to be welcomed as the "shadow of socialism." And because "monopoly is here, whether we wish it or not," Socialists needed to be in power to direct the trusts to socialist ends, he believed, or else Republicans, Democrats, or Progressives would only mitigate the excesses of trusts through trust-busting reforms that would only soften capitalism, precisely as a means of maintaining "the co-operation of capitalists only, not the co-operation of the people."[29] Berger treated the issue of class in a similarly dialectical manner. Unlike pragmatists such as Thorstein Veblen, whose condemnation of the "leisure class" grasped the class problem as one of "conspicuous consumption," Berger followed Marx in locating the problem at the level of total global production, compelling Socialists to aspire for "the right of not a few cents more but for the right to the product of all their labour, which they know can only happen by becoming the owners of the means of production," echoing the German party's ob-

28 Pittenger interprets Berger's "ultra-organicist perspective" as an advocacy of capitalist state ownership of trusts rather than a sober acknowledgement of changed circumstances. Marx and Engels embraced Darwin's naturalism, but they did not concede to it as a strategic model for social development. Pittenger's and Lloyd's argument that Socialist political positions fell back on overriding scientific discourse overlooks how many of these issues boiled down to contemporaries' commonsense recognition of irreversible shifts in the structural development of capitalist society. Pittenger, *American Socialists*, 3, 158; Lloyd, *Left Out*, 93.

29 Berger, "Socialism as an Evolutionary Process," *SDH*, 3 February 1912, 1; "Trust Smashing is as Silly as the Bull Against the Comet," *SDH*, 20 May 1911, 1. See also Eugene Debs' speech delivered at Central Music Hall, Chicago, "Competition vs. Cooperation" (29 September 1900).

structionist line, "To this system, no man and no penny."[30] In this same spirit, Berger declared from town halls to the congressional floor, "There can be no social freedom nor a complete justice until there are no more hirelings in the world, until all become both the employers and employed of the world."[31]

Berger's theoretical grounding in Marxism led him to understand capitalist class conflict as an antagonism between the relations and forces of production, and only incidentally between two groups of people. As Berger explained, "We know that the capitalist is just as much a product of the present system as is the proletariat." For this reason, "We shall preach no class hatred. But we will preach class consciousness and class conscience six days in the week […] We shall reach out the brotherly hand to all who want to work with us to free our people from mental, moral, and economic bondage, no matter to what class any man may belong."[32] Marx had pronounced all history the history of class struggle in his 1848 *Manifesto*, but he clarified its modern meaning in the concept of the "Bonapartist" capitalist state, standing over and above society and simultaneously representing the interests of everyone and no one, or, capital—"the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of leading the nation […] full-grown bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labour by capital."[33] Bonapartism, Marx's fundamental political lesson from the failed Revolutions of 1848, did not refer to the rule of an individual despot. Rather, it denoted the political and social imperatives of the modern capitalist *state*, namely the necessity of a permanent, armed bureaucracy to pacify the warring classes and defend the executive capitalist state against civilian democratic authority.[34] For

30 Berger, "Milwaukee Workingmen Cannot be Fooled," *SDH*, 2 September 1911, 2. Whereas Pittenger's and Lloyd's intellectual histories regard the influence of contemporary social science as crippling the integrity of the socialist movement, Fink's labor history, following Kloppenberg, sees it as a boon to American radicalism, which otherwise lacked a wider middle-class audience and a more practical political orientation. Pittenger, *American Socialists*; Lloyd, *Left Out*; Fink, *Long Gilded Age*; Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory.* See Gary P. Steenson, *"Not One Man! Not One Penny!": German Social Democracy, 1863–1914* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981).

31 Berger, "Speech of Hon. Victor L. Berger, Representative from Wisconsin" (14 June 1911), in Victor L. Berger and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Victor L. Berger (VLB) papers* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Microform, 1994), reel 28, frames 245–246. Papers primarily housed in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

32 Berger, "The Milwaukee Leader," *Milwaukee Leader*, 1, as co-published in *SDH*, 16 December 1911, 1.

33 Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France (1871)," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 631. See also Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Section I, 594–603.

34 While Hans-Ulrich Wehler has been one of the few historians to maintain "Bonapartism" as a category of analysis, his characterization of Otto von Bismarck's *Obrigkeitsstaat* ("authori-

Marx, the irreversible new reality of the "Bonapartist" capitalist state revealed the necessity of taking political power as the immediate strategic aim of socialists. As Berger reiterated, it was not the moral corruption of capitalists but the *social* exigencies of industrial capital, *politically* mediated by the capitalist state, that drove manufacturers to mimic the productive conditions of their competitors, as it "compels the employers to pay as little for their labour as possible," along with exploiting more precarious sources of labour, like children.[35] In this way, Berger's Marxist framework cut against a simplistic distinction between "private" as capitalist and "public" or "state" as non-capitalist.[36]

The Second International concretized and elaborated the necessity of political means for gradual social revolution out of capitalism, with temporary proletarian state rule, or, "the dictatorship of the proletariat" forming the pillar of its political orientation.[37] As a strategic response to the preponderance of the Bonapartist state, after 1848 Marx stressed the necessity of seizing the capitalist state by any means, in order to subsequently achieve the elimination of "bourgeois right" and the gradual "withering away of the state." In particular, Marx theorized the necessity of a capitalist-to-socialist transitional regime consisting of working-class control of global capitalism, during which wage labour and the state would still exist, until the eventual realization of socialism, or, the classless society operating on the principle, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."[38] This transitional period he termed "the dictatorship of the proletariat," or, the political rule by the proletarian class, as against

tarian state") as "the Bonapartist dictatorship up to 1890" suggests a rather narrow meaning of Bonapartism, centered on the figure of a Napoleon III or a Bismarck rather than the structural exigencies of the global capitalist state. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, trans. Kim Traynor (Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, UK: Berg, [1973]1985), 55.

35 Berger, "Socialism and Liberty," 1.

36 Eric Foner, and Leon Fink following him, invoke this binary and end up reinforcing American exceptionalism. For Foner, appeals to "free labor" occupied a uniquely American public discourse, in contradistinction to the French Third Republic, where the "social solidarism" of a progressive state held more cultural capital than claims to "liberty." Fink argues that America's "mutualist path," typified by its Masonic lodges and mutual aid associations, led not to state institutions but to private commercial ones—implied as "more capitalist." Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), xiii-xiv; Fink, *Long Gilded Age*, 31–32. On America's "mutualist path," Fink cites Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 191–230.

37 Karl Kautsky reinscribed the dictatorship of the proletariat as official SPD and Second International strategy. Karl Kautsky and Wm. E Bohn, *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, [1892]1910), 12–13; Kautsky, *The Road to Power*, trans. A. M Simons (Chicago: Samuel A. Bloch, 1909), "Chapter I: The Conquest Of Political Power."

38 Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program (1875)," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 531.

the rule of the capitalist class. As Marx stated in a letter to his comrade Joseph Weydemeyer, he considered this theory for the necessity of a political revolution followed by a gradual social revolution to be his greatest contribution as a thinker.[39] Following Marx's lead from the First International, the Second International from 1889 subordinated "social action"—the activities of labour unions, principally the fight for higher wages and a shorter workday—and "political action"—running socialists for office and broadcasting socialist demands—as both means to an end, namely, the strategic goal of seizing the state.[40] Erfurt Marxism located the significance of these civil-social reform struggles in their role as the "school for revolution," not their immediate effects on the capitalist economy or politics, respectively, both of which were negligible. The strategic potential of political action had become only further clarified through the late nineteenth-century development of mass socialist parties and hyper-militarized states, two major changes since the First International, which Engels remarked in 1895 had rendered obsolete "rebellion in the old style, street fighting with barricades." Instead of using the spectacle of citizen insurrection, Second Internationalists saw that popular mass parties could be more effective, both as a tactic for winning over the military and for the overall strategy of eventually taking over the state. As Engels put it, the franchise "became our best means of propaganda."[41]

The SPA tried to square its programme with the Germans' Erfurt Programme, which posited the necessity of a political path through the conquest of the state. On one end of the spectrum, Victor Berger's main Socialist rivals, the "impossibilists," promoted by Charles Kerr's *International Socialist Review*, considered it "impossible" for political participation and reform to ever achieve socialism and instead championed extra-political social action alone. The majority SPA position represented by Berger embraced progressive social reforms more warmly than the impossibilists, but, in line with the Erfurt programme, framed reforms as a means of educating the workers in class consciousness rather than a transitional path to power in themselves. Berger's immediate aim was essentially the same as contemporary Second Internationalists like Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin: the socialist seizure of political power. While European Marxists repeated the call for the "dictatorship of the proletariat," American socialists like Berger and Debs used the term "industrial democracy" to express this same idea.[42] Although Berger looked to a future in which

39 Karl Marx, "Letter to Weydemeyer (1852)," *Marx-Engels Reader* 220. For Marx's clearest programmatic statement on the dictatorship of the proletariat, see Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," 537–538.

40 See Karl Marx, "Inaugural Address to the First International (1864)," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 512–519.

41 Friedrich Engels, "The Tactics of Social Democracy," *Marx-Engels Reader*, 567.

42 According to Lloyd, the Dutch Marxist Anton Pannekoek coined "industrial democracy" in Pannekoek, "Socialism and Anarchism" (part 1), *New Review*, January 1913, 122–124.

people would produce in common rather than in competition, like Marx himself he remained reticent to elaborate on the exact details of the future socialist society. Berger occasionally used overlapping references to "Collectivism" and "the Co-operative Commonwealth," and his representations of socialism fluctuated between abstract epochal projections—"a step forward toward a higher civilization than history has ever known"—and structural political economic definitions—"collective ownership of the means of production and distribution."[43] More often, he concerned himself with Socialists' ongoing political task of achieving state power so that the transition to socialism could begin in earnest.[44] Though Berger put a lot of faith in democracy, he recognized that in order to carry capitalist society into socialism, "In the Co-operative Commonwealth the industrial democracy must rule."[45] In the editorial, "How to Make the Change," Berger framed the dictatorship of the proletariat as a *means* to socialism and not an end in itself:

> During the transition period the sale of products may take place exactly as at present, only subject to regulation by the government which will be in the hands of the working class […] Why, then, if the proletariat gets political power, should workingmen's associations not be possible, which, instead of the capitalists, will own the factories where the workmen themselves will choose the managers and themselves receive the profits? […] We speak of the transition period. In this transition period, the Socialist government, of course, can lend the necessary capital to the productive societies and furnish suitable guarantees.[46]

Indeed, Berger held out the theoretical possibility of a violent revolution and insisted on the need for an armed citizenry. Significantly, Socialists did not consider the debate between reform and revolution as a division between anti- and pro-violence stances. In the context of mass socialist parties with major societal support, the question of revolution did not hinge on acts of spectacular violence the way it would for the New Left from the 1960s, when urban guerrilla warfare became associated with revolutionary credentials, in the absence of a revolutionary socialist party. Though Berger hoped for a peaceful route to socialism, he wrote, "That all this will take place peacefully, I do not maintain. However, it surely will not come peacefully if the people are not

However, the term was used by American Socialists throughout the preceding decade. Lloyd, *Left Out*, 437n21.

43 Berger, "Socialism is Not Communism," 1.

44 By contrast, Gilded-Age utopian socialists like Edward Bellamy, William Morris, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman put serious energy into speculating on what socialism would look and feel like. Pittenger, *American Socialists*, 64.

45 Berger, "Socialism or Communism" (December 1907), in *Broadsides*, 36.

46 Berger, "How to Make the Change," 242–243.

armed."[47] Berger's attitude mirrored the International's position, which maintained the prospect of using a people's militia to defend legitimately won seats in government, against the revisionist position of Eduard Bernstein, whose sanguine view of the state presumed it would never come to that, at least not in advanced capitalist nations. Like his fellow Erfurt Marxists, Berger upheld the liberal concept of a people's militia, "against all standing armies," since "a standing army means a standing preparation for war," invoking Engels' account of the standing army as a historical outgrowth of the Bonapartist capitalist state in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).[48] Nevertheless, Berger remained adamant about not making a virtue out of potential necessity and strongly opposed adopting force as a leading strategy. However, not all Socialists felt this way. The "Wobblies" of the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, 1905), led by SPA National Committee member "Big Bill" Haywood—who proudly declared, "I've never read Marx's *Capital*, but I have the marks of capital all over me"—rejected Socialist "educationalism" and upheld a "no compromise and no surrender" militancy.[49] The Wobblies soon renounced party politics altogether and preached the general strike as the only road to revolution. The intra-Socialist debate over political versus "sabotage" tactics finally came to a head at the 1912 National Convention, where the majority coalition led by Victor Berger, Morris Hillquit, Job Harriman and John Spargo, and supported by Debs, passed the anti-sabotage clause by a vote of 191 to 90, expelling any member who opposed political action or advocated crime, sabotage, or other violent methods. Haywood was

47 Berger, "How to Make the Change," 244.

48 Berger, "Socialists Advocate Real Citizen Soldiery," *SDH*, 12 July 1913, 1. According to Sally Miller, Berger must have written about the importance of arming the workers in "despair." She claims that after his 1910 election success he never again wrote in this vein. This is false. The citation above is from a 1913 editorial, and he elaborated these ideas in other post-1910 pieces, including "A Confession of Their Utter Bankruptcy as Parties" (1911) and "Let Us Safeguard Our Freedom" *SDH*, 18 May 1912, 1. Relatedly, Ira Kipnis, and Brian Lloyd, following him, conflate Marxism with revolutionist bloodlust, vacuously claiming that by 1910 Berger "simply dismissed Marx as hopelessly out of date" on the basis of his increasingly vocal anti-sabotage sentiments. Pittenger recycles this conclusion, citing Kipnis as well as two articles by Berger. However, in these pieces, Berger simply saw "talk of revolution as outlandish because people aren't adequately armed or prepared for an uprising." Miller, *Victor Berger*, 155n32; Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 240n109; Lloyd, *Left Out*, 196–197; Pittenger, *American Socialists*, 132n12; Berger, "Do We Want Progress by Catastrophe and Bloodshed or by Common Sense?" (25 September 1909), in *Broadsides*, 228–229.

49 J. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town Sets Off a Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 233; Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1987), 97; John Newsinger, *One Big Union of All the Workers: Solidarity and the Fighting IWW* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2017), 8.

recalled from the National Committee and immediately left the party, taking around 15 % of the membership with him.[50] From Berger's perspective, and ultimately that of IWW-cofounder Debs who left the Wobblies after a few years, the anarcho-syndicalists failed to address the issue of the class struggle for power, namely, the socialist seizure of the state.

Above all, Berger insisted that mere tinkering with the system would fail. Rather than appealing to the state for progressive reforms to improve the condition of working people, the Socialists proposed that the working class should organize itself to take state power. "We should have to drain the swamp—change the capitalist system—if we want to get rid of those mosquitos," Berger declared. "Teddy Roosevelt, by starting a little fire here and there to drive them out, is simply disturbing them."[51] The 1912 election marked a new alignment of the political order, in which the split of Republicans between the Progressive Theodore Roosevelt and the Republican William Howard Taft resulted in the election of the Democrat Woodrow Wilson. Regarding the new alignment of capitalist parties, Berger declared, "They will differ in method as to the administration of government but will, of course, resist with equal ardor any attempt of the working class to emancipate itself […] And this rule holds good for all candidates of non-proletarian parties as far as proletarian issues are concerned."[52] Like Debs, Berger recognized that Populism had failed because it could not preserve its political independence as a working-class movement, a strategy Marx termed "revolution in permanence."[53] Infamously, at a 1906 conference in Noroton, Connecticut where Socialists gathered many of the New York "Millionaire Socialists" in order to gain their financial backing, Berger made a polarizing outburst late in the evening over drinks. Addressing several wealthy supporters of William Hearst and the Municipal Ownership League, he erupted, "They are your laws. We abhor them. We obey them because you have the power to force them on us. But wait until we have the power. Then we shall make our own laws and, by God, we will make you obey them!"[54]

50 Bell, *Marxian Socialism*, 73–77.

51 Berger, "Why the Panic Came" (December 1907), in *Broadsides*, 104.

52 Berger, "Anti-Labor Candidates, Corrupt Bosses and Feeble Platforms Plutocracy's Campaign Offering," *SDH*, 20 July 1912, 1.

53 Marx, "Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League (1850)," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 501–511.

54 Morris Hillquit, *Loose Leaves*, 58–59; See also Robert D. Reynolds, Jr., "The Millionaire Socialists: J. G. Phelps Stokes and his Circle of Friends" (PhD diss.: Harvard University, 1977).

## The International Party

To counter the global capitalist state, manifest regionally as the national state, socialists put forward the international party as a globally responsive institution—the Second International—whose national parties comprised parts of a unified whole.[55] Hardly a case of indigenous American political inertia, the SPA's "symbiotic relationship" with the International was marked by vigorous transnational traffic of ideas and personnel.[56] The concept of an American "translation" of European Marxism misleads us into thinking that Marxism started as a strictly European phenomenon and steadily grew outwards geographically. Marx's own work appraised global capitalism with American developments in mind, as he made explicit at times, and his views were shaped by his correspondence with comrades who had emigrated to the U.S. The project became only more transatlantic with the subsequent expansion of Marxism and the increased emigration of Marxists like Berger. In this sense, there was never German Marxism or American Marxism outside of international Marxism. To conceptualize SPA Marxism as "a class manifestation of the National Question"[57] is to ignore its constitutive internationalism.

If the German Empire offered the most cogent expression of the capitalist *Klassenstaat* ("class state"), Bonapartism in America largely took the form of ideological "nonpartisanship." Midwestern populist organizations like the American Society of Equity (1902) called to completely eliminate political parties, defined as hopelessly corrupt institutions.[58] Berger, as in his dialectical critique of trusts, scoffed at strictly contrarian anti-party advocates, likening them to the English Luddites who mistakenly viewed machines as the problem rather than the capitalist ownership of machines. To Berger, the rampant corruption of party politics marked an expression rather than a cause of capitalist domination. The key was to explicitly frame capitalist politics—political parties and elections—as a *class* issue: "The interest of the proletariat can never

55 Stephen Burwood frames Debsian socialism as a *necessarily* transnational civil-political response to the spread of industrial capital across national borders. Stephen Burwood, "Debsian Socialism through a Transnational Lens," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, no. 3 (2003), 257.

56 Miller, "Americans and the Second International," 372. Miller's essay is ultimately far more cynical, framing the SPA's rapport with Europe as the repeated attempt to use the International to advance its own national interests.

57 Buhle, *Marxism in the United States*, 13.

58 The American Society of Equity was founded to organize farmers' cooperatives as a "Third Power," aiming to compete with capital and organized labour on equal terms. Active in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota, Equity directly inspired the Nonpartisan League in 1914, founded by former North Dakota Socialist Arthur C. Townley, whose message resonated among small farmers begrudging corporate interests.

be expressed in a 'non-partisan' manner. It must always be partisan to the working class, and naturally antagonistic to the capitalist interests as expressed either by the Republican or the Democratic party or by a reform 'non-partisan' combination of both of them."[59] Meanwhile, the "capitalist press" was selling "nonpartisanship" as a sham, which "means all parties united against the Socialist party."[60]

In the International's own self-understanding, including the Americans', reform and revolution were not mutually exclusive. Yet, this basic point would be hard to ascertain from the literature, which has overstated the party's revisionist character and white-washed its revolutionary Marxism. Berger's biographer writes of the Bergerite Socialists, "In policy, the tone of the party was revisionist rather than Orthodox Marxist, with the reformist wing succeeding in monopolizing party offices and thereby implementing a gradualist, step-at-a-time political approach."[61] This single statement provides an extremely useful distillation of a common misunderstanding by historians, namely, that Socialists held a zero-sum, nondialectical relationship between reform and revolution, and thus to promote reform was to demote revolution. For Erfurt Marxists, however, there was no such thing as being reformist "in policy," because revolutionary socialism was never against reforms as an immediate tactic.[62] This became most apparent during the German party's "Revisionist Debate" (*Revisionismusdebatte*) (1896–), in which a minority of "revisionists" led by Eduard Bernstein broke with "Orthodox Marxism" by proclaiming the gradual, progressive evolution of socialism out of capitalism and, consequently, the irrelevance of political revolution, prompting a firestorm of rebuttals by Erfurt Marxists such as Luxemburg and Kautsky.[63] When Bernstein declared, "This [final goal of socialism], whatever it may be, is nothing to me; but the movement is everything," Luxemburg replied, "the final goal of socialism constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the Social-Democratic movement from bourgeois democracy."[64] The controversy, which engulfed the whole Internation-

59 Berger, "A Confession of Their Utter Bankruptcy as Parties," 1.

60 Berger, "The Nonpartisan Workingman is a Traitor to his Class," *SDH*, 22 July 1911, 1, a repurposed version of "Abolish Parties? What For?" (23 January 1909), *Broadsides*, 188.

61 Miller, "Americans and the Second International," 373.

62 In a related move, Jack Ross reduces the Socialist "revolutionary Left" to a monolithic "path" of anti-reformism and pro-violence, in order to claim that there were "no revolutionary socialists in the SPA." Ross, *Socialist Party of America*, 60–61.

63 See Henry Tudor and J. M. Tudor, ed., *Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate, 1896–1898* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

64 Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism: A Criticism and Affirmation* (NY: Schocken Books, [1899]1961), xviiff, originally published as the article, "Der Kampf der Sozialdemokratie und die Revolution der Gesellschaft: 1. Polemisches, 2. Die Zusammenbruchstheorie und die Kolonialpolitik," *Neue Zeit* (1898), 556; Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (1899), "Introduction," www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/intro.htm (Accessed 7 April 2022).

al, was not a debate over policy—Kautsky and Luxemburg never denied the tactical significance of reform—but rather a question of emphasis on means versus ends. By misrepresenting the Revisionist Debate as a division between pro- and anti-reform positions, historians have exhibited a slippage between revisionist *gradualism* (from capital-ruled capitalism to labour-ruled capitalism) and the dictatorship of the proletariat's *transitionalism* (from labour-ruled capitalism to classless socialism).

The SPA's own reconciliation of reform and revolution is unthinkable without the precedent set by the International. Historians have underestimated how the SPA's position was shaped by the SPD's Erfurt Programme of 1891 and Karl Kautsky's adjoining theoretical commentary, *The Class Struggle* in particular. As the official statement of Second-International Marxism, the Erfurt Programme sought to mediate the dialectic of objective historical conditions and subjective revolutionary will, advancing both supra-legal revolutionary indignation and the need for a reformist *tactic* during a long non-revolutionary period. It insisted on its distinctive crisis conception of capitalism, which would develop "ever more stark the opposition between exploiters and the exploited, ever more bitter the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat," thus making necessary the proletariat's abolition of private property in the means of production.[65] Ten years later, the Americans at the Socialist Unity Convention (July 1901) established the SPA's founding platform, written by a committee of seven delegates including Berger, which mimicked Erfurt's emphasis on inevitable class crisis, the need for socialist political independence, the strategic goal of proletariat self-abolition, and the tactical use of elections for setting up the conditions for socialist revolution:

> Private ownership of the means of production and distribution is responsible for the ever-increasing uncertainty of livelihood and the poverty and misery of the workers, and it divides society into two hostile classes—the capitalists and wage workers […] But the same economic causes which developed capitalism are leading to Socialism, which will abolish both the capitalist class and the class of wage workers [ …] While we declare that the development of economic conditions tends to the overthrow of the capitalist system, we recognize that the time and manner of the transition of Socialism also depends upon the stage of the development reached by the proletariat. We, therefore, consider it of the utmost importance for the Socialist Party to support all active efforts of the working class to better its position and to elect Socialists to political offices in order to facilitate the attainment of the end…But in making these demands as steps in the overthrow of capital and in the establishment of the Cooperative Commonwealth, we warn the

65 SPD, *The Erfurt Program*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (1891), www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1891/erfurt-program.htm (Accessed 14 November 2021).

> people against the public ownership demands made by capitalistic political parties, which always result in perpetuating the capitalist system through compromise or defect of the Socialist revolution.[66]

In order to consolidate the proletariat's class interest, Berger believed that they needed a change of consciousness that could only come from the socialist party, whose primary role it was to instil class consciousness in the working masses. Erfurt Marxism formally laid out the need for the disciplined and uncompromising socialist party led by professional revolutionaries, based on the Second International's theory of "socialist consciousness," or, "consciousness from without." First formulated by Karl Kautsky, the leading theorist of the SPD (and by extension, the International), the concept related to his "merger formula," which conceptualized the party as the merger of the working class and the radical bourgeois intelligentsia. According to Kautsky, workers' struggles in themselves would be restricted to "trade union consciousness"—immediate demands for short-term, sectional gains for some workers, limited to the immediate horizons of possibility within capitalism. Only under the party intellectuals' educative and disciplining influence "from without" could workers subordinate their daily struggle to the needs of "socialist consciousness," aimed at the achievement of the future classless society—socialism.[67] American leaders like Berger similarly contended that the party gave workers a tangible goal beyond capitalism, by linking their daily struggles to the long-term goal of socialism. At the level of ideology, wrote Berger, "the most formidable obstacle in the way of further progress—and especially in the propaganda of Socialism—is not that men are insufficiently versed in political economy or lacking intelligence. It is that *people* are without *hope*" (*sic*).[68] Religion would not do the trick either. While Berger made no secret of his antipathy for the Catholic Church—"Between capitalist exploitation and Roman Catholic exploitation, we prefer the former, no matter how bitterly we must fight it"—he ultimately believed that socialism could capture the hearts of Americans without necessarily impeding their religious practices, since "religion is a private matter as far as socialists are concerned."[69] Though Communism would later be pegged as strictly anti-religious, Berger exhibited the militant commitment to civil liberties characteristic of the older Marxist tradition.

While the previous generation of socialist leaders such as Wilhelm Liebknecht (1826–1900) had recognized the need for reciprocity between the unions and the par-

66 SPA's founding platform, republished in "The Socialist Party," *SDH*, 17 August 1901, 2–3.

67 The argument for "socialist consciousness" comes from Karl Kautsky, draft program of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party, *Neue Zeit* XX, I, no. 3 (1901–02), 79, quoted and cited in Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1902), "Chapter 2: The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats," 14.

68 Berger, "Give Them Hope," 1.

69 Berger, "As to the 'Militia of Christ,'" *SDH*, 12 August 1911, 1.

ty, the spike of both union and socialist membership at the turn of the century exacerbated the competition for workers' support. Since the International's 1896 London congress, its official policy held that socialist unionists should not be obligated to join explicitly socialist unions, compelling the SPA to instate "dual unionism." At the 1907 Stuttgart congress, SPA delegates overwhelmingly favoured the German-Austrian position of "cooperative autonomy"—a reaffirmation of the 1896 position—against the Swedish and Belgian proponents of overlapping affiliations. Berger's corporeal metaphor of a "two-armed theory" reflected the International's majority position: "I believe in a two-armed labour movement—a labour movement with a political arm, which is the Socialist party, and an economic arm, which is the industrial organization. But I want each arm to fulfil its own mission. I don't want the two arms to interfere with each other. I want them to help each other out, as they do in the human body."[70] Berger was not a "pro-AFL socialist," as he made explicit.[71] "I do not agree with the political methods of [the American Federation of Labor's] leaders and have vigorously opposed them," he wrote. "The leadership has become a cog in the Democratic machine."[72] Against the craft unionism of Samuel Gomper's AFL, Berger declared, "We stand for industrial unionism to combine all those working for the same employer in the same industrial organization, and at almost every convention of the American Federation of Labor I have introduced resolutions looking toward that end and was voted down regularly by trade union leaders of the old style."[73] Though it remained a subject of controversy within the party, official dual unionism meant that Socialists would not split the trade union movement monopolized by Gompers' AFL. In hindsight, given the political success in 1917 of Lenin's Bolsheviks, who time and again acted on the calculated risk that "a split in the workers' movement for socialism is a precondition for revolution,"[74] we can at least hypothesize that the SPA might have benefitted in the long-run from a hard split with the AFL.

The American party both benefitted from and instrumentalized the rich transatlantic exchange of discourse and personnel. Prominent American leaders like Berger, as well as young Socialists without party positions, habitually found their way to Europe, where they opened up national debates to the international arena. For instance, Berger sought to hurt Gompers' reputation among American workers by undermin-

70 Berger, "Victor L. Berger Gives His Views of Sabotage Crowd," *SDH*, 23 August 1913, 1.

71 Esposito, *Ideology of the Socialist Party of America*, 175.

72 Berger, "Address to Mr. Chairman of the Committee on Labor," *VLB papers*, n.d. ca. 1912, reel 28, frames 264–265. See also Berger, "Address to the President and fellow delegates," *VLB papers*, n.d. ca. 1912, reel 28, frames 256–257.

73 Berger, "Victor L. Berger Gives His Views of Sabotage Crowd," 1.

74 James Robertson, "Lenin & the Vanguard Party: In Defense of Democratic Centralism" (speech at a conference of the West German Spartacus, February 1973), www.bolshevik.org (Accessed 9 October 2021).

ing his international credibility. In 1909, Berger arranged to speak to a Berlin crowd whom Gompers had just addressed, in order to deliberately repudiate his speech and convince German workers of the AFL's conservative, non-revolutionary bent. In his Berlin speech, Berger called out the American trade unions for functioning as capitalist rackets, which only served to secure high tariffs "for some clique of manufacturers" and never for the whole of the working class. He further reprimanded the AFL for "the prevention of strikes and for the PROMOTION OF 'HARMONY BETWEEN CAPITAL AND LABOR' […] for the purpose of protecting the class struggle," rather than pushing to abolish it altogether.[75] SPA members regularly visited the headquarter of the International Socialist Bureau (ISB), the International's permanent executive and information body since 1900, based in Brussels. In November 1909, Berger spent time at the ISB to help plan the agenda for the International's 1910 Congress in Copenhagen. The Americans always prioritized the International's congresses, held every three or four years, and attended each one with increasingly large delegations. The Americans were even willing to undergo the burdensome effort of hosting the International's first ever congress outside Europe in 1917, a prospect soon undercut by the war.

Berger's Milwaukee, "the most German city in America," boasted all the features of socialist cosmopolitanism: a distinct immigrant culture of artisanal and skilled labourers, the weak hold of religious institutions characteristic of German cities since the mid-century, and a dense network of civil-social organizations (*Vereine*) resembling those of the SPD.[76] Second Internationalists straightforwardly considered reading and writing to be part of the mortal struggle to overthrow capitalism. To this end, Milwaukee Socialists engaged in a major cross-fertilization of ideas with their comrades abroad. Many were assiduous readers of the German socialist press. Socialists encouraged international solidarity with contemporary struggles across the world, whether major events like the 1905 Russian Revolution—an American-sponsored ISB resolution called for the commemoration of the 1905 revolution, to the chagrin of the right-wing of the German party—or discrete strikes and protests.[77] European socialists' provision of theoretical support, including prefaces and translations of each other's works, forged an acute sense among Americans of belonging to an international movement. During World War I, Lenin publicly celebrated Eugene Debs as the

75 Berger, "Victor L. Berger in Berlin," *SDH*, 6 November 1909, 2.

76 Stan Nadel, "The German Immigrant Left in the United States," in *The Immigrant Left in the United States,* ed. Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 45–46, 53, 63–64. For the SPD *Vereine*, see Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

77 Georges Haupt, *Bureau Socialiste International: Comptes Rendus Des Réunions Manifestes Et Circulaires* (Paris: Mouton, 1969), 189.

"American Bebel."[78] As for Berger, his popular writings epitomized the Marxist conviction that workers from different nations had more in common than with employers within their own nation. Editorials like "We Will Apply the Philosophy of International Socialism to a Local Situation" belie historians' construction of a homegrown American socialism. The very letterhead of his *Social Democratic Herald*, "A Journal for the Coming Civilization," spoke to the internationalism of Milwaukee socialism. In this spirit, upon the election of Socialist Emil Seidel as mayor of Milwaukee in 1910, Berger proclaimed, "Thus the battle won November the 8th in Milwaukee has an international significance […] this party was not started and built up solely for the purpose of getting political jobs for fifty or for five hundred. This party was started for the emancipation of the working class."[79] Reflecting on why Milwaukee became "the American vanguard," of the socialist movement, he noted that, unlike earlier utopian socialists such as Albert Brisbane, after whom Milwaukee's city hall was named, and unlike contemporary progressives and anarchists, "we are Marxists."[80]

## Organizing American Civil Society for the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

The continual growth of the SPA, like other Second International parties before 1914, exacerbated internal differences and sparked a crisis of the movement's purpose. In the SPD, what had started as a dispute between Eduard Bernstein and Erfurt Marxists fed into the "great schism" between reformist and revolutionary elements running from 1905 through the rest of the party's history, gradually engulfing the entire International.[81] While the German party officially rejected revisionism and reinscribed Erfurt Marxism as its official doctrine, the de facto Revisionist Debate only intensified, as the growth of the Free Trade Unions (*Freie Gewerkschaften*) outpaced that of the German party, dissolving the Erfurt union of revolution and reform by tilting the scales toward the latter in practice. This ongoing Revisionist Debate was inflected by two main factors: the steady growth of socialist parties and the question of socialist militancy, the

78 Lenin, "On the Appeal of the German Independents" (February 1919), *Lenin Collected Works* (*LCW*) 42, 2nd English ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 126b–127a.

79 Berger, "What Makes Us Willing to Work and to Sacrifice," *SDH*, 3 December 1910, 1. See also Berger, "We Will Apply the Philosophy of International Socialism to a Local Situation," *SDH*, 9 April 1910, 1.

80 Berger, "Workingmen of Milwaukee, You Form the American Vanguard" (4 September 1909), in *Broadsides*, 216–222; Berger, "It is a Worthy Accomplishment," *SDH*, 11 February 1911, 1.

81 Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy, 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1955]1983).

latter raised first by the mass strikes of the 1905 Russian Revolution and then intensified by the growing anticipation of war from 1907. To be sure, polarization within the International was a crisis of success, a function of the growing popularity of the socialist movement. External to the party, socialist momentum produced a crisis of capitalist politics. The SPA's remarkable electoral victories from 1910 to 1912 prompted its 1912 convention crisis as well as a crisis within the American political system. In Lenin's article on the 1912 election, "The Results and Significance of the U.S. Presidential Elections," he observed, "the significance of the elections lies in the unusually clear and striking revelation of bourgeois reformism as a means of combating socialism."[82] The mounting backlash only served to reinforce Erfurt Marxism's crisis theory of capitalism, which said that capitalist crisis arose not from supra-human economic forces but from the conscious organization of the working class for socialism, since, according to Kautsky, "our 'positive' work, as soon as it strengthens the proletariat, by just that very fact, sharpens the antagonism between it and other classes."[83]

As for the party's "'positive' work," what exactly was Berger's position on revisionism? It was certainly more complicated than the historical consensus reducing him to a revisionist. More accurately, Berger was "as willing to exploit Bernstein's revisionism as Marxist orthodoxy."[84] Like most Socialists, Berger polemicized vehemently against political alliance with progressives, keeping in line with Karl Kautsky, who maintained that revisionism undermined the party's strategic political independence from capitalist politics.[85] In the SPA's official capacity, all the American delegates voted in support of rejecting revisionism at the International's 1904 Congress in Amsterdam. Within American dialogue, the Revisionist Debate took shape through a debate in the *International Socialist Review*, when an avowed Bernsteinian writing under the pseudonym "Marxist" sparred in a series of article with Ernest Untermann, whom Paul Buhle has described as "the most learned of the American Socialist intellectuals" and who later served as Foreign Editor of Berger's *Milwaukee Leader*.[86] The revisionist "Marxist" implored socialists to devote themselves fully to daily trade union tasks, while Untermann stressed socialists' duty to "educate the proletariat into class consciousness for the purpose of voting itself into political power."[87] Berger absolutely identified with

82 Lenin, "The Results and Significance of the U.S. Presidential Elections" (9 November 1912), *LCW* 18, 402–404.

83 Kautsky, *The Road to Power*, Ch. 8, "The Sharpening of Class Antagonisms."

84 Miller, *Victor Berger*, 24

85 Dick Geary, *Karl Kautsky* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 12–13. According to Peter Nettl, "The German Social Democratic Party, 1890–1914, As a Political Model," *Past and Present* 30 (April 1965), 69–74, the Revisionist Debate implicated the party's organizational orientation, namely, whether their strategic isolation from the rest of capitalist society was natural and desirable, or, for revisionists, a historical contingency to be ameliorated.

86 Buhle, "Intellectuals in the Debsian Socialist Party," 37–38.

87 Ernest Untermann, "Evolution or Revolution," *ISR* 1, no. 7 (1901).

Untermann against the revisionist "Marxist." However, Berger eventually published excerpts of Bernstein's writings in his own *Herald* from 1901, leading some to call him the "American Bernstein."[88] Nevertheless, while Berger made no secret of his sympathies to Bernstein's views, championing "practical work" to which "all the force of party activity should be put," he did not dogmatically adopt a revisionist position, writing, "Indeed many of his [Kautsky's] charges against Bernstein are just. Bernstein has injected new ideas into the party, but he gives no suggestions for a new and better programme."[89] Quite apart from Bernstein, Berger insisted that socialists' progress did not gradually negate the need for revolution in a zero-sum manner, but rather, "The economic-evolutionary principle—which, by the way, does not exclude so-called revolutionary exploits, but rather includes them—is the best legacy of Karl Marx."[90] Ultimately, Berger found value in the questions that revisionism brought to the surface, and especially for posing the question of the movement's substantive results.

Of course, Socialist Party activity primarily consisted of civil-social organizing, and only intermittently of election campaigns and reform proposals. Historians' notion that the SPA "favoured immediate demands and piecemeal reforms, framed, to be sure, within the language of the Marxist class struggle" misconstrues the fact that the American party, like the German SPD, implemented hardly any political reforms at all, instead concentrating its activities on facilitating the working class' self-organization as an independent constituency in civil society, united for the goal of taking state power.[91] If the economic arm of Berger's two-armed strategy consisted of union activity, then the "political arm" referred mainly to the party's *social* activity of carving out an autonomous space within society, where a truly robust network of Socialist clubs and organizations appeared as a "state within a state," to use Max Weber's characterization of the SPD. Socialist organizations and services included publishing houses, childcare, youth clubs, adult education lyceums, legal counsel, Socialist academies, Sunday Schools, an Intercollegiate Socialist Society, women's organizations, drinking groups, choirs, sports clubs, and more.[92] Socialist newspapers like Berger's would post notices of party meetings and social events, along with labour news and commentary. Party members also ran Socialist encampments in the American heartland, modelled after religious revivals and Populist iterations, bringing hundreds of thousands of beleaguered rural citizens together for music, classes, speeches, and discussions primed

88 Berger, "Not 'Revolutionary Humbugs,' *SDH*, 22 April 1905, 1.
89 Berger, "The Bernstein Doctrine for America," *SDH*, 12 October 1901, 1.
90 Berger, "Edward Bernstein," *SDH*, 19 October 1901, 1.
91 Miller, "Americans and the Second International," 379.
92 See: Kenneth Teitelbaum, *Schooling for "Good Rebels": Socialist Education for Children in the United States, 1900–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Max Horn, *The Intercollegiate Socialist Society, 1905–1921: Origins of the Modern American Student Movement* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979).

by texts like Walter Thomas Mill's *The Struggle for Existence* and Oscar Ameringer's *The Life and Deeds of Uncle Sam*, the latter of which sold half a million copies and was translated into fifteen languages.[93] The party ran all of these activities completely independent of the state. Therefore, to claim that "The Americans [the Socialist Party] were hardly involved in their society as was the SPD"[94] is to impose onto the pre-war era a constricted definition of politics from the neoliberal era, based on appeals to the state and largely circumscribed to single-issue policy advocacy and election canvasing.

Second Internationalists' self-contradictory attitude toward democracy—participating in the state in order to abolish it—was more a matter of Marxist-Hegelian determinate negation than the term "ambivalent parliamentarians"[95] might suggest. As Engels' had put it, "universal suffrage, intelligently used by the workers, will drive the rulers to overthrow legality, that is, to put us in the most favorable position to make revolution."[96] In the German context, this obstructionist tactic included the refusal of the empire's largest party to vote for a national budget in parliament or participate in the *Hoch* ("hail") to the Kaiser. American Socialists likewise used parliaments largely negatively as platforms for agitation rather than positively as legislative organs. Berger's career reflected this strategy of "pure opposition" and agitation, as he dedicated much more time and energy into churning out socialist propaganda in his presses and speeches than he did trying to ram through policy proposals. Ultimately, Berger viewed contingent political structures—including democracy—dialectically, not as ends in themselves but as a means for capitalism's self-overcoming. Thus, "while the ballot itself will not make us free, it will put the means into our hands of achieving our freedom."[97] Strategically, once enough Socialist politicians were elected to Congress, they could eventually change the structure of the American political process to make it more amenable to socialist revolution. Therefore, Berger fought to update the U.S. constitution, "framed at a time entirely different from ours."[98] As he wrote in the edi-

93 For a description of the Socialist encampments, see John Graham, ed., "*Yours for the Revolution": The Appeal to Reason, 1895–1922* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 196–7.

94 Miller, "Americans and the Second International," 380 repeats this claim from Gerhart Niemeyer, "The Second International: 1889–1914," in *The Revolutionary Internationals, 1864–1943,* ed. Milorad M. Drachkovitch (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Publications, 1968), 107–108.

95 James Joll, *The Second International, 1889–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 329. Lloyd, following Kipnis, overstates the "poverty of American Marxism" by anachronistically pitting the pre-war SPA against a Third International rubric of economic rupture and "revolutionary spirit of Marxism." Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism*, 197.

96 Engels to Paul, *ELC* vol. 3 (12 November 1892), 211.

97 Berger, "Labor Day Greetings," 2.

98 Berger, "Which Do We Want—A Constitutional Fetich or Majority Rule?" 1.

torial entitled, "Political Reforms are of Minor Importance," "Of the political reforms a new constitution is the most important."[99]

Victor Berger's political behaviour at the municipal and national levels pursued the International's dialectic of organizing a particular set of workers for a universal socialist revolution. During elections, Milwaukee Socialists' municipal platform called to provide free public concerts and lectures, enhance parks, use schools as community centres, liberate saloons—"the proletarian's club house"—eliminate police regulation of workers' dance halls, offer free public education, medical, legal, and educational services, public ownership of utilities, equitable taxation, and public works projects including adequate water and sewer service, spawning the nickname "Sewer Socialists."[100] The ascent of the city's movement drew major figures into its fold, like left-wing celebrity Oscar Ameringer, the "Mark Twain of American Socialism," who moved to Milwaukee in 1913 to work as a columnist and editor on Berger's *Milwaukee Leader* and serve as a county organizer for the party.[101] On the national stage, Berger's fellow congressmen generally received him quite cordially despite his radicalism. This would not last after the Russian Revolution and the failed revolutions across central Europe from 1918–1923 that it inspired, after which anti-socialism dominated America's political culture. As a lone Socialist in Congress in his first 1911–1913 term, Berger promulgated such longstanding SPA positions as the abolition of the Senate, presidential veto and Supreme Court power of judicial review, and the establishment of the democratic referendum and right of recall. He also proposed legislation to nationalize railroads and telephone lines, and to issue loans to municipalities for the purpose of providing full employment to all willing workers.[102] In his first ever resolution, he called for the withdrawal of American troops at the southern border poised to intervene in the Mexican Revolution. Most significantly, along with proposing for the first time in Congress an old-age pension bill, he passed a resolution to investigate and sponsor hearings on the 1912 "Bread and Roses" strike by textile workers in Lawrence, MA. The hearings won national sympathy for the strikers and earned Berger praise from all factions of socialists, including Bill Haywood and the Wobblies.

Civil-social organizing, as opposed to top-down bureaucratic compulsion, was the key to the party's success in regions as different as Milwaukee and the rural Southwest. In terms of the national terrain of the movement, a San Francisco order of 150,000 of Congressman Berger's speeches in September, 1912 gives some indication of his

99 Berger, "Political Reforms are of Minor Importance," *SDH*, 16 September 1911, 1.

100 See Elmer A Beck, *The Sewer Socialists: A History of the Socialist Party of Wisconsin, 1897–1940* (Fennimore, WI: Westburg Associates, 1982).

101 Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken: The Autobiography of Oscar Ameringer* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, [1940]1983), 285.

102 House of Representatives 25680 (10 July 1912), *VLB papers*, reel 28, frame 218–219.

geographical reach.[103] While Milwaukee served as a leading example of Socialist urban momentum, in the early years the SPA was concentrated in agrarian and mining areas of the American West and Southwest, where Populism had thrived in the late nineteenth century. Before 1912, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Arkansas claimed more dues-paying Socialist members than New York. Like Berger's Milwaukee, the Southwest movement was more of an educational than a political force, organizing battered rural workers under the banner of a common global proletariat political struggle. Even the most "grassroots" of Socialists cultivated "the German form of organization," bringing many former populists under party discipline and establishing coordination between the local, state, and national offices. Oklahoma Socialists grew especially rapidly by adapting the "Milwaukee system": disciplined political tactics—electoral campaigns with committeemen placed in most of the state's voting precincts—and the slow building of an autonomous Socialist civil-social milieu—"Little Red School Houses" sponsoring debates on evolution and revolution, party picnics, Sunday Schools, and collective meeting spaces for working class fraternization. Oklahoma party secretary Otto Branstetter forged close personal ties with the Milwaukee organization and the National Executive Committee. Still, Berger was not afraid to criticize regional reform policy if it threatened to liquidate Socialist independence from progressive welfare-statism. With the National Executive Committee behind him, Berger criticized the Southwest delegates' farm programme and moved to table their 1910 platform, since its guarantee to tenants of the right to public land in perpetuity aimed toward "permanent private property" rather than socialism.[104] Berger chastised the programme as "state socialism," warning that it would funnel right into Teddy Roosevelt's New Nationalism calling for government protection of welfare and property.[105]

To understand the party's lesser inroads in the South, we must confront the party's official relationship to disenfranchised groups along with the prejudices of individual Socialists like Berger. Since the party's founding Unity Convention, which featured three black delegates out of 125, the Debsian party vehemently denounced Southern anti-black racism and took a staunchly racial integrationist line, declaring black workers' interests to be united with those of all workers.[106] The SPA's pre-war membership boasted many of the most prominent female and black civil leaders of the day, including Margaret Sanger, Hellen Keller, Grace Campbell, and racial segregationist Kate O'Hare, along with W.E.B. Du Bois, Hubert Harrison, Wilfred Adolphus Domingo,

103 Miscellany, 1910–ca. 1927, *VLB papers*, reel 31, frame 480.

104 James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), xi, 39, 83, 233.

105 Socialist Party, *Proceedings of First National Congress* (Chicago: H. G. Adair, 1910), 228–229, 235.

106 Ross, *Socialist Party of America*, 58. See Eugene Debs, "The Negro in the Class Struggle," *ISR* 4, no. 5 (November 1903); "The Negro and His Nemesis," *ISR* 4, no. 7 (January 1904).

A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, the latter two who in 1917 transformed a black unionist monthly into *The Messenger*, "the only radical Negro magazine in America," advising its black readership to vote Socialist on the basis of its representing all workers. Since their 1901 founding platform, Socialists called for "equal civil and political rights for men and women." Women made up 1/10 of party membership and played a visible role in party affairs, including strong party leaders like Bertha Hale White, the first female Executive Secretary of the SPA, and Lena Morrow Lewis, the first woman on the National Executive Committee.[107] Women made up almost half of party journalists and a majority of copy editors and staff people. 6–10 % of female Socialists served as delegates, compared to the Republican and Democratic parties that featured virtually none (0–1 % pre-1914).[108]

Though Erfurt Marxism preached equality across all genders and races, it did not immunize all Socialists from commonly held cultural prejudices during the historical peak of social Darwinism and scientific racism. While it is important to question the common argument today that racism is a primary motivation for those who exhibit it, Victor Berger was nonetheless a startling case-in-point of contemporary prejudice. His intermittent defence of "whiteness" expressed a deep-seated cultural prejudice conflating economic and racial explanations of social difference. Berger was particularly influenced by Lewis Henry Morgan's notion of cultural evolution, which posed that societies evolved through a series of linear stages—savagery, barbarism, and civilization—defined by advanced technologies and property relations. "For the next twelve generations no one can organize Chinamen on a Caucasian basis," wrote Berger. "Scientists tell us that the anatomy of the Jap is different from ours—it is more simian (ape-like) […] we cannot change our anatomy in many generations." Debs, the face of the party, assured the membership that such views had "no proper place in the socialist movement."[109] To be sure, Socialist leaders rarely voiced such blatant racism. Most were appalled by Jim Crow, and several Socialists were instrumental in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), including Massachusetts abolitionist Mary White Ovington and socialist intellectual William English Walling, who founded the National Women's Trade Union League in 1903.

107 Other prominent female Socialists included Anna Louise Strong, Ida Crouch-Hazlett, Anna A. Maley, Jessie Wallace Hughan, Rose Pastor Stokes, Mary Marcy, Elizabeth Chambers Morgan, Leonora O'Reilly, Pauline Newman, Theresa Malkiel, Josephine Conger-Kaneko, and Wilfred Adolphus Domingo. See Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

108 Sally Miller, *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century American Socialism* (New York: Garland, 1996), 97–98.

109 Berger, "We Will Stand by the Real American Proletariat," *SDH*, 12 October 1907, 1.

If the party could not erase Berger's racist convictions, it could subordinate them to the party line in practice. Thus, Berger's political behaviour represented the interests of blacks, however beside the point it was for him personally. Despite his prejudice, Berger supported black suffrage when the issue was before the House of Representatives, and he endorsed a bill for federal supervision of southern primaries. He also introduced measures benefitting D.C. residents that would have aided the city's large black population.[110] The national and international party also exerted a disciplining force on the immigration question, about which the Americans were especially concerned. In the SPA's early years, Berger and Untermann, chair of the Committee on Immigration, had expressed their staunch anti-Asian immigration stance on an explicitly racial basis. The National Congress's reprimands in 1910 made them backpedal and stress the environmental rather than the racial basis of their reasoning:

> Any argument which ignores the difference in the environment of European and Asiatic immigrants, any insinuation that we exclude these Asiatics ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR RACE (*sic*), misses the main point of the position of the majority report […] This does not mean that any one race is physically inferior to another … But it does mean that races separated by centuries of economic evolution cannot jump in a few years over chasms of race peculiarities emphasized and ossified by peculiar economic conditions.[111]

Thus, Berger could claim a Lamarckian understanding of the heritability of acquired characteristics rather than overt biological racism. Reframing his anti-Chinese sentiment as cultural rather than racial discrimination, Berger came to rely on a purely economic justification for excluding cheap Chinese labour, on the basis of their exploitation as low-paid workers, strike-breakers and contract workers, all of which diluted organized labour and lowered the working-class standard of living. Here too, the Second International congresses provided a platform for adjudicating the issue. At Stuttgart in 1907 and Copenhagen in 1910, New York City Socialist Morris Hillquit, serving as Vice President of the International's Commission on Emigration and Immigration, proposed the Americans' majority position calling for exclusionist restriction of "artificially stimulated immigration" from nations whose low industrialization

110 Sally Miller, *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender*, 37.

111 Ernest Untermann, "A Reply to Debs," *SDH*, 20 August 1910, 2. Berger published similar remarks in Untermann, "The Immigration Question," *SDH*, 10 December 1910, 2. Lloyd overstates the case of Berger, who allegedly "insisted that socialism was an issue more of race than of class." Pittenger illuminates how Berger and other Socialists drew upon the movement's characteristic scientism to harmonize racist attitudes with socialist commitments. Lloyd, *Left Out*, 94; Pittenger, *American Socialists*, 168–170. For the 1907–1908 immigration dispute within the party, see Kipnis, *American Socialist Movement*, 276–288.

precluded their receptivity to the labour movement, singling out East Asians while denying prejudice. However, the castigations by other internationalists, including the American Louis Boudin, shot down an exclusionist programme decisively, instructing the Americans to condemn exclusion and simultaneously to vocalize opposition to capitalists' deliberate importation of cheap labour.

Ultimately, the political consequences of Berger's racism were bound to the better instincts of the national and international movement. More significant than Berger's bigoted sentiments themselves was the fact that the international socialist party, as a non-state, transnational actor, could exert a deleterious influence on them, and likewise, that the SPA was sufficiently incorporated in the International to force a realignment on their immigration stance. Moreover, it speaks to the embeddedness of Erfurt Marxism in the American party that one of its greatest leaders would transgress Marxism's liberal line on racial equality before abdicating the core tenets of proletariat political independence from progressives and the subordination of reform to socialist revolution more peculiar to Marxism. The fact that the party attracted some open bigots reveals that the historical socialist movement was constituted by concerted political aspirations rather than ethical positions. Today, for better or worse, the preponderance of moral discourse and absence of mass socialist parties speaks to an inverse condition.

## Conclusion

In the United States, as elsewhere, World War I destroyed the Second International from the inside and out.[112] With the advent of the Great War, Berger and the Socialists maintained strict opposition to American entry in what they understood to be an

112 Ever since Daniel Bell's Weberian condemnation of Socialists' ideological obstinance, it has been the consensus view that the American socialist movement dissolved due to its uncompromising Marxist sectarianism, citing the SPA's opposition to the American entry in World War I as a losing position in popular opinion. Conversely, for Kipnis, the SPA failed from being *insufficiently* Marxist, by virtue of its "vote-getting" and "sewer socialism" typified by Berger's Milwaukee, and the 1912 expulsion of the anarcho-syndicalists was the main culprit leading to the 1919 Communist split. Relatedly, David Shannon chalked up the Socialists' failure to an absence of class consciousness in American culture. Jack Ross' recent monograph, following James Weinstein, attributes the SPA's war-time crackup to the expulsion of Haywood's "left-wing" element but also emphasizes the role of Wilsonian state repression as a contributing factor. Pittenger and Lloyd locate the failure at the level of ideology, namely, the deleterious influence of American pragmatism and positivism on Marxism. None of these accounts quite grasps the transnational rubric that Socialists set for themselves. By their own standard, what failed was not "American socialism" but socialism, which they understood as a global political project. Bell, *Marxian Socialism*; Kipnis, *American Socialist Movement*; David Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York: Macmillan,

imperialist war.[113] Shortly after America entered the war in April 1917, the Wilson administration passed the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, the first federal law to criminalize seditious speech since the late eighteenth century. Having made criticism of the war or the president a crime, they quickly moved to suppress Berger and the Socialists. The Wilson regime banned all SPA publications, disqualified Socialists from elections, and removed their state representatives from office, backed by a Supreme Court decision that deemed the SPA a membership organization as opposed to a political party. The federal government revoked the *Milwaukee Leader*'s mailing privileges and sentenced Berger to a twenty-year prison sentence, vacated only after a long legal battle. Following the 1918 election, he was denied a duly elected seat in Congress, even after winning it again in a second vote.[114] The Supreme Court eventually overturned the verdict in 1921, and Berger was elected to three successive terms from 1922 to 1928, when he was defeated by William Stafford and returned to Milwaukee to resume his career as a newspaper editor. A year later, while crossing the street outside his publishing office, he was struck by a streetcar and died within weeks at the age of sixty-nine. Meyer London, the only other Socialist congressperson, died in a separate car accident that same year.

For historians, the challenge remains to understand Berger and the early SPA on their own terms. Why has the historiography of the past 60 years misrepresented Berger as a welfare-statist, grassroots municipal leader? We can only speculate that left-leaning scholars have looked back to the older tradition through the lens of their own historical moment, spotlighting only those aspects of the past that conform to a post-New Left political imagination. Without being able to step outside of our own biases today, it is crucial to try to trace the contours of the Socialist movement as it stood, recognizing the vigorous international traffic in ideas and the fundamental distinctions between socialists and competing contemporary projects. American Socialists actively debated the validity of trade unionism, the structure of the capitalist state, and the necessity of working-class state rule as a transitional path to socialism. Not only was Berger a political representative of the most numerically vast and organizationally advanced socialist movement in American history, but as an ideological leader who helped build and disseminate Second-International Marxism in a popular idiom, he contributed to socialists' propensity to meaningfully differentiate themselves from

1955); Ross, *Socialist Party of America*; Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America*; Pittenger, *American Socialists*; Lloyd, *Left Out*.

113 Ross overstates the extent to which Berger was "radicalized" by the war. Berger simply maintained the SPA's longstanding Marxist position on imperialist war, re-formalized in the party's St. Louis Platform in 1917, while others like Meyer London abandoned the platform. Ross, *Socialist Party of America*, 220.

114 See Eric Thomas Chester, *Free Speech and the Suppression of Dissent during World War I* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

progressives and liberals. Any "right-left-centre" labelling of Socialists must accommodate the fact that even "right-wing" Socialists like Victor Berger identified as Marxists and aggressively rejected the equation of socialism with Progressivism and Populism. Accordingly, Berger based his efforts on the conviction that mass socialist parties such as the SPA would steer the world-historic overthrow of capitalism. Although the exact meaning of "revolution" for Socialists merits further scrutiny, it is clear that it signified a total social transformation bent on abolishing wage labour, at minimum.

By contrast, today's nominal socialists, inspired by Bernie Sanders' 2016 and 2020 Democratic presidential campaigns, by seeking a more robust welfare state to bust up neoliberal monopolies and redistribute wealth, resemble the politics of Gilded Age progressives like newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst and "trust-buster" Theodore Roosevelt, more than they do Socialist politicians like Berger. It is easy to forget that the most progressive welfare states in the world relinquished basic civil liberties in order to curb the democratically organized socialist movements of their day, from Otto von Bismarck's Anti-Socialist laws (1878–1890) to Woodrow Wilson's terrorism against the SPA. As historic welfare state repressiveness demonstrates, and as observers at the time well knew, the construction of mass socialist parties under the Second International, in the United States as elsewhere, represented a fundamental challenge to the established order. Throughout Berger's electoral campaigns and his work in office, by insisting that "the ultimate aim of our party is not reform, it is a revolution," Berger, like Debs, was not a Populist prophet of an American movement but a genuine Second International Marxist.[115] The revolutionary Marxist credentials of the SPA's most "right-wing" leader in the late *liberal* era throw critical relief on "socialists" in the late *neoliberal* era, who by comparison appear to mark the complete absence of a socialist movement altogether, at least by historical Socialists' own standards. To be able to begin asking why this is the case, we must start by acknowledging that a historical discrepancy exists in the first place.

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115 Berger, "What Makes Us Willing to Work and to Sacrifice," 1.