Radical! :
American Collective Memory from the Civil War to the Great War

Claire O'Neill

Undergraduate Thesis | CHP Senior Project
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Department of History

Advisor: Dr. Ernest Freeberg

April 14, 2008

Radical Collective Memory from the Civil War to the Great War

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction 2
2. Collective Memory 5

3. Sowing Seeds: Immigration and Americanization 9
4. American Conversions 13
5. Auspicious Steps: The S.P.A., Radical Propaganda and Memory . . 21

6. Other Movements: Anarchism and Black Radicalism 29
7. Paradigm of John Brown 32
8. The Great War and the Death of Radicalism · Conclusion 35

Works Cited . . . 41

1. Introduction

To begin where the story ends, it is December 1919—dead of winter but the First Red Scare heats America. Eugene V. Debs, American Socialist mouthpiece, sits in an Atlanta jail for speaking against U.S. involvement in WWI, a violation of the recently passed Espionage Act. Concurrently, on the eve of deportation from America, "two of the most dangerous anarchists in this country,"[1] Russians Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman make one last plea to the American people. Beseeching their audience to recognize threats to liberty, such as the deportation of dissenters, and to make one sweeping check on the government in the form of revolution, they write at Ellis Island :

> "Shall we here, on this soil baptized with the sacred blood of the great heroes of the Revolutionary War, engage in the sanguinary slaughter of brother against brother?... Long has your masters' service humiliated and degraded you. Will you permit yourselves to be driven into still more abject slavery? Your emancipation is your work... Take action."[2]

They conclude, not by citing Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin or German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, but by invoking the Spirit of '76, quoting great American liberators and dissenters like Wendell Phillips :

> "The community which dares not protect its humblest and most hated member in the free utterance of his opinions, no matter how false or hateful, is only a gang of slaves."[3]

Jaded and defeated, these two rebels bade a reluctant farewell to what had been home for a quarter of a century, abandoning any revolutionary hopes for America therein. World War I thus marked the end of one wave of radical activity in America. At the height of the Great War, Russia withdrew from the Allied cause as the Tsar abdicated and

---

[1] Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 125.
[2] Wendell Phillips cited in Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, "Deportation: Its Meaning and Menace," (New York: 1919). http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/goldman/deportation.html
[3] Ibid.

Bolsheviks seized power under Lenin. In the U.S., under the pressures of war and radical pacifist dissent, wartime sentiments of anxiety, nationalism and xenophobia ran high.

Immigrants and natives alike faced imprisonment, blacklisting and deportation during the years 1917-1920 for activities judged un-American—un-patriotic, foreign or disloyal—by Washington. Anything bearing a remote semblance to socialism or communism was, fittingly, a red flag to the government. Although not all radicals were jailed, their periodicals were seized, their rallies disbanded, and their ideas hushed. As Goldman and Berkman put it, "Free speech is a thing of the past."[4]

Although signaling the end of an era, this address also typified a tendency that had grown into a tradition amongst radicals: demanding revolution in patriotic, American terms. In just this small excerpt, the religious language ("soil baptized with sacred blood"), the reference to Revolutionary War heroes, and further reference to American emancipationists like Wendell Phillips, Abraham Lincoln and William Lloyd Garrison all illustrate this strategy to energize Americans. Goldman ends with a compilation of citations in which famed American figures endorse free speech and dissent: from Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln, from Thomas Paine to Henry David Thoreau, this careful selection of quotations strives to remind Americans of their radical past.

The more the public denounced them as seditious pariahs, the more these radicals believed themselves martyrs for the American ideals of liberty. Whether direct actionist anarchists or democratic socialists, whether immigrants or American natives, all leftist radicals shared a common ground: they were idealists committed to cause, determined to be heard and to challenge the status quo. Especially at the height of war, however, that challenge to the status quo was hampered mostly by the task of translation. In order to

[4] Ibid.

speak to the "masses," radicals would need to translate ostensibly foreign ideas into American terms, and prove still further that these ideas were rooted in American tradition.

Products of industrial and scientific revolution, and experiencing the subtle cultural shift from Victorian to modern society, Gilded Age radicals encouraged Americans to recognize the social plights unique to their time and place. As the nature of labor evolved to meet industrial needs, socialists mobilized the work force to organize along class lines and to fight for basic rights to property, fair hours and wages. At a time when fervent nationalism, and a growing union between big businesses and the government, seemed to threaten America's cherished tradition of individualism, anarchists believed it more important than ever to defend the revolutionary traditions of free speech, free thought, even free love. Radicals embraced and encouraged societal transformation, and hoped to persuade society at large to do the same. But to do this—to connect with an American audience in a familiar language—the speaker would naturally require a certain understanding of American culture and history.

An examination of radical rhetoric will ultimately reveal that understanding. The characters are early American anarchists and socialists—both immigrants and natives—the content their writings and speeches, all set within the wider context of fin de siècle America. Here is the story of how a radical minority fought for recognition as both defenders of American tradition and ushers of a better American future. With theoretical and arguably foreign origins, radical ideology would evolve and eventually bloom into its American form, consequently becoming more acceptable and increasingly more popular.

Indeed by 1912 it would bolster a growing and formidable third party movement that offered voters a radically different vision of America's future.

To advocate their position on the present and vision of the future, radicals turned to the past for cogent parallels and paradigms. In this sense, their language is teeming with resurrection and reinterpretation of earlier American radicals, particularly the abolitionists, and is laden with emancipationist language. The lifespan of this radical era, beginning in the 1890s and ending at WWI, and the varying levels of success and failure experienced therein, can be illuminated by reconstructing the lens through which radicals viewed America and remembered its history. Setting the radical interpretation of history within a wider scope of collective memory furnishes a better understanding of the rise and fall of radicalism in America.

2. Collective Memory

Big names, key dates, important events, and neatly classified movements help us to organize the past. But historicizing collective memory enriches that conception; it humanizes the socio-cultural climate of an era by exploring how various groups may have remembered a shared past in different ways, opting to emphasize certain elements of history while neglecting others. How we understand the past speaks to how we situate ourselves in the present.

In concrete terms, the Civil War was still fresh in America's memory at the turn of the century. And while most Americans remembered the war as a misfortune, and focused on postwar reconciliation and reunion, some were remembering their radical predecessors (i.e. Civil War abolitionists and American Revolutionists), and were reinterpreting historical anecdotes to promote their own, quite different agenda. In order

to better understand their role in modern society, radicals were constructing another interpretation of the Revolution and the Civil War, a divergent collective memory.

The summer of 1913 marked the official semi-centennial commemoration of the Civil War and, as historian David W. Blight argues, the national celebration at Gettysburg confirmed the triumph of a certain mentality in American culture: one that he designates "reconciliationist." Veterans and their progeny from the north and south gathered that summer to celebrate the successful reconciliation that had resulted in modern-day fraternity. They no longer dwelled on sectional differences, but embraced national harmony. "The Blue and the Gray clasping hands," Blight says, "became a popular symbol of social peace in a time when the disorder of race riots, labor strife, class antagonism, and bewildering immigrant diversity dominated social consciousness."[5]

Blight's study, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, epitomizes the recently growing attempt to historicize memory. His project examines the evolution of Civil War memory up to the war's semicentennial celebration. He argues that the post-war emphasis on sectional reunion and reconciliation was critical for the preservation, development and perpetuation of the Union. Further, he posits, a national reconciliationist mentality was only possible at the expense of the more marginal "emancipationist" mentality—or the emphasis on abolition, racial equality, and the more radical aspects of the war. In his words, he tells the "story of how the forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national culture," a result of "the inexorable drive for reunion."[6]

[5] David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), 355.
[6] Blight, 2.

Although he certainly heeds the undercurrent of emancipationist mentality, Blight is more concerned with mainstream collective memory and national identity, and focuses on the forces that defeated this marginal mindset. The emancipationist memory was peripheral, he explains, but still it "never died a permanent death," as 20th-century civil rights revolution would later confirm.[7]

The radicals' attempt to reinterpret and rewrite American history in the early 20th century actually proves, however, that an emancipationist conception of the Civil War assumed many forms well before the 1960's civil rights movement. And this attempt united two ideological camps often deemed irreconcilable by historians: socialists and anarchists—for both shared a common emancipationist mentality that differed from the mainstream. Radicals continued aggressively in the footsteps of their emancipation predecessors; just as abolitionists defeated chattel slavery, they worked to liberate the modern industrial wage slave.

By considering the elements that Blight deemphasized—that is, by stressing other perspectives and memories of the Civil War—social cleavages of the era come into focus. If each age is characterized by the struggle for a prevailing memory, then social and cultural conflicts can be understood in those terms. If radicals were not at Gettysburg commemorating reconciliation and celebrating national reunion, we can learn much about their movement by exploring what were they doing and what were they commemorating.

In an essay *Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method*, historian Alon Confino theorizes more broadly the idea of collective memory:

> "...[C]ollective memory is an exploration of a shared identity that unites a social group, be it a family or a nation, whose members nonetheless have different interests and motivations... The crucial issue in the history of memory is not how

[7] Ibid.

> a past is represented but *why* it was received or rejected...for every society sets up images of the past. Yet to make a difference in a society, it is not enough for a certain past to be selected. It must steer emotions, motivate people to act, be received; in short, it must become a socio-cultural mode of action."[8]

Confino argues that collective memory is not a passive and unwilled phenomenon, but an active, creative process that caters to present social and political demands. Someone, or some group, determines what from the past will be remembered and what will be forgotten. Whether in textbooks, government propaganda, popular films or novels, the preservation of history is driven by purpose.

But "conflicts over memory exist," Confino explains. "Differences are real. People are sometimes ready to die for their vision of the past, and nations sometimes break because of memory conflicts. But all this only begs the question: how, then, in spite of all these differences and difficulties, do nations hold together?"[9]

On one hand, radicals used history in their attempt to reshape American collective memory. If they could convince the majority of their interpretation of the past, then their ideas of the present and future would also triumph, because the battle for the past, or for prevailing memory, is also a battle for the present.

On the other hand, one theme of American history is the perpetual struggle to remain the *United* States—the interminable striving for unity, perhaps even homogeneity, that began with its origins. In a country as pluralistic as America, there must be some common denominator that underlies the whole structure, giving its inhabitants a sense, however vague, of some global cohesion. If something within the framework threatens

---

[8] Alon Confino, " Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 5 (1997). http://www.jstor.org/ (accessed April 4, 2008).

[9] Ibid.

that unity, either the structure will break or one element must give. In a battle, even over memory, there can only be one victor, and rarely is it the underdog.

While Americans continued to debate the meaning of the Civil War through the First World War, it nonetheless provided closure to this period. With the wartime demand for national unity, as seen after the Civil War, Americans were less inclined to remember history as radicals did. The emphasis on historical rebels such as American Revolutionary heroes and Civil War abolitionists was not palatable to most Americans, who were increasingly confronted by war propaganda and the prospect of friends or family in combat. At the height of war anxiety, the public would embrace more comforting, patriotic and unifying figures—rather than divisive stories and rebellious characters. Ultimately, the immediate demands of a modern-day war eclipsed the significance of the Civil War in popular culture, and once again national union trumped dissent.

3. Sowing Seeds: Immigration and Americanization

During and after the American Civil War, optimistic European eyes focused on America. Not only did European socialists view the Civil War and the abolition of chattel slavery as the beginning of labor emancipation in general, but they also saw the postwar industrial boom as an auspicious step toward their revolutionary vision. No economy in the world could rival America's capitalistic development, and according to Marxist doctrine, this foreshadowed proletarian revolution. Many thus believed that the worldwide socialist revolution would commence in America, as labor unrest would be most acute wherever capitalism prevailed. The greater the disparity in wealth, they believed, the faster the socialist mobilization.

Karl Marx actually covered the Civil War as a London correspondent for the *New York Daily Herald*; he and Engels had watched avidly and with invested interest the development of North American affairs. Upon Lincoln's re-election, Marx qua the International Workingmen's Association congratulated the President in a letter. He wrote that the "American Antislavery War" would initiate "a new era of ascendancy...for the working classes." Marx was convinced that Lincoln had already begun to "lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world."[10]

So radicals had adopted a sort of American exceptionalism, but with a twist. In his aptly titled *European Socialists and the American Promised Land,* R. Laurence Moore puts it this way:

> "European Marxists had launched a major propaganda attack in the mid-1880s on...[the] myth about the United States as a land of equality, prosperity and opportunity. Yet because of the ironical view of progress ensconced in the Marxist dialectic, the same evidence was employed in exposing imaginary stories about how capitalist America could be turned around and used to confirm the idea of a unique destiny for the trans-Atlantic nation... John Winthrop, in embarking on his famous voyage on the *Arabella*, had different hopes for the New World than nineteenth century Marxists, but many of the latter came around to view that the fulfillment of European dreams awaited developments in the New World. No sooner had Marxists rejected and swept out the back door one image of the American promised land, than they were ushering a new version of the American Canaan in through the front."[11]

This wave of optimism, compounded by hard times in Europe, brought a great number of hopefuls to America. In the decade before the Civil War, hordes of emigrants flooded American shores. Germans, for example, constituted a large share of this influx,

[10] Karl Marx, "Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America," *The Bee-Hive Newspaper*, No. 169, (1865), http://www.marxists.org/

[11] Robert Laurence Moore, *European Socialists and the American Promised Land* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 59.

many of them liberals seeking refuge after the failed democratic revolutions of 1848.[12] Importing a historical sense of class-consciousness, dogmatic ideological commitments, and their own predictions for America's future, these German immigrants sowed the seeds of the American socialist movement.

The radical movement itself, however, had sluggish beginnings. Led by a small, insular group of German-speaking immigrants, early socialism did not easily lend itself to American traditions. In fact, most Americans would never even be exposed to it, and of those that were exposed, many would initially find it foreign and intimidating, meeting it with ruffled feathers and furrowed brows.

Meanwhile, many continental Europeans watched their exiled counterparts in dismay. Friedrich Engels, for example, chastised the small German-American movement for what he considered unyielding Marxian dogmatism and an incapacity to foster organic growth according to American needs. After all, "how could Americans become acquainted with socialist ideas when the socialist press in America was almost entirely printed in German?"[13]

The early socialist movement was almost completely isolated from the growing labor and union movements, and without the support of these groups, the future of socialism was bleak. Mystified by the general lack of socialist enthusiasm in so capitalist a country, Engels nevertheless attributed this in part to the lack of a distinctly American movement. Again, he encouraged his fellow Germans to Americanize—both themselves and their movement—whatever that may require.

---

[12] James Weinstein, *The Long Detour: The History and Future of the American Left* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2004), 30.
[13] Moore, 17.

But what would this process of "Americanization" entail? Emigrants were pressured to integrate not only by continental Europeans, eager for socialism to launch abroad in America, but also (and moreover) by Americans themselves. As the number of immigrants increased during this time, nativism increased correspondingly, if not exponentially. The white Anglo-Saxon protestant majority feared Catholic immigrants' rising political power, and the impact of millions of foreign workers on the economy.

These years succeeding the Civil War were indeed characterized by immigration and the fear of it. But it was also an era of booming industrialization and corresponding exploitation of the labor force; economic panics; a swelling urban population; a nascent but increasingly distinctive middle class; and a shift from small town values to more urban, bureaucratic ones.[14]

Improvements in communication and transportation allowed for a more efficient spread of information, and American inhabitants began to develop a more tangible sense of national identity that reached beyond their small-town limitations. The growth of an integrated national economy, middle-class fears of immigrants and labor radicalism, and the longing for a post-Civil War reunification all contributed to a strong desire for reconciliation and unity among opinion leaders and the middle-class. On the other hand, clashes between labor and capital fuelled the rise the rise of socialism, and sparked the radicals' hope of a national movement.

Recognizing the need for an American movement, immigrant socialists such as Victor Berger, Morris Hillquit and Daniel De Leon founded socialist publications in English and encouraged local Americans to join the party. As early as 1895, De Leon claimed in *The People*, that its "readers...are overwhelmingly English speaking, not

[14] Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966).

German," so as to dispel "that hoary-headed superstition" that all socialists were austere Germans.[15]

The success of the radical movement would depend upon its capacity to lend itself to an American audience. The more dogmatic and revolutionary European socialists, such as Daniel De Leon of the Socialist Labor Party, saw little success on the national stage. Although he was indeed one of the more impressive theorists and philosophers, the Curacao-born agitator ultimately lacked the ability to make his ideas accessible. Regarded by many as a party tyrant, De Leon alienated many moderate socialists, including other immigrants, and proved the need for simplicity within the cause

It was not the immigrants' mass appeal to the American people that served as the most important boon to the movement, however, but rather the conversion of a few key Americans at the end of the 19th century. With an unusual but compelling understanding of American history and culture, these American converts would challenge the consensus with new ideas expressed in recognizable language, and in turn make the most convincing large-scale appeals.

4. American Conversions

To appeal to their fellow Americans, native-born radicals frequently used conversion stories, expressing that they too initially had reservations that socialism was un-American. Frederic Heath, for example, penned his conversion account *How I Became A Socialist* in 1903. "I supposed I was a Republican," he wrote, because "[that] party had given black slavery its quietus, and I had imbibed strong anti-slavery ideas from my maternal grandsire..."[16] Heath was disturbed by the Haymarket incident of

[15] Daniel De Leon, "That Hoary-Headed Superstition," *The People*, (August 11, 1895), slp.org
[16] Frederic Heath, "How I Became a Socialist," *The Comrade*, (April 1913), marxists.org

1886, which he had witnessed in Chicago; a bomb was detonated during a police invasion of a striker's meeting, and eight suspected anarchists were arbitrarily tried for murder. This event, he claimed, "forced [his] attention to conditions [he]...previously, as a dutiful Republican, had refused to see."

Already entertaining radical inklings, Heath finally tipped toward socialism after reading Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward.* Set in the year 2000, the best-seller tells the story of a young man who falls asleep at the end of the 19th century, and awakens nearly a century later to find America transformed into a socialist utopia. This compelling portrait of America's socialist future indeed won many Americans to the socialist cause, and made it a popular topic of conversation for many more. *Looking Backward* is in fact one of the better examples of an American interpretation of socialism writ large.

At this point, as Heath wrote, his knowledge of socialism was still purely theoretical and he had yet to join the movement. Then, back in his home city of Milwaukee, he met Victor Berger, pioneering German Socialist and editor of *Wisconsin Vorwärts,* the town's German Socialist daily (and later editor of the English-language *Social-Democratic Herald* and *Leader*). According to Heath, "[the] great desire among the German Socialists...at the time was to have Socialism become native to the soil; for they saw that there could be no progress otherwise..." Heath "was urged to work toward the establishment of an English-speaking branch..."[17] and he devoted his youth to just that.

The conversion of such key Americans in socialist hot spots like Milwaukee was a turning point for the small movement. Many American socialists, as Heath

[17] Ibid.

demonstrates, initially considered themselves Republicans, remembering its valiant history of abolishing chattel slavery. But with the use of American history, immigrant socialists like Victor Berger reinterpreted politics and coaxed tentative partisans toward socialism:

> "...The Republican Party...has accomplished one great historical fact—it has freed the negro. That was done, not for humanitarian reasons, but because chattel slavery was incompatible with modern capitalism... [I]t stood for a great deal of "business" during the late Civil War, and because, by its high-tariff proclivities and its banking laws, it has given a strong impetus to the profits of the manufacturers and bankers."[18]

Berger criticized the two-party duopoly, arguing that both had long-abandoned their original platforms. The radical Republican party of Abraham Lincoln, for example, had become no more than the party of "manufacturers and bankers." As Blight argues, post-bellum politics were characterized by an aversion to the radical: Democrats garnered support by accusing Republicans of radicalism; Republicans responded by de-emphasizing their radical history. "In 1868," he writes, "the Republican Party retrenched onto a platform of order and stability; they would now be protectors of a status quo rather than innovators."[19]

In response to this tendency, Berger stressed that people with humanitarian, emancipationist beliefs belonged with the socialists, not the Republicans. And as an immigrant, Berger pushed further, arguing that both radicals and immigrants were elements of American tradition:

> "...The fact remains that we are all immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants... There can be no doubt that...immigrants have had a beneficial influence on all public affairs. They furnished many wise political leaders...[and countless]...fought in the late Civil War on the side of the North... As a whole the

[18] Victor Berger, *The Victor L. Berger Papers*. Microfilm, Roll 28, Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994, (accessed at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, December 2007).
[19] Blight, 99.

immigrants are always on the right side of every moral question. They stood out against slavery...in the overwhelming majority."[20]

Of course, not all Americans were Republican before converting to Socialism. Eugene Debs, for example, from small-town Terre Haute, Indiana, was part of the enormous industrial labor force. He was initially drawn to the Populist platform, which included the practical demand for an 8-hour workday, and later to the Democratic Party, which had in time absorbed many of the Populist planks. Debs's conversion to Socialism was gradual as he became increasingly involved in labor organization. In his 1902 article also entitled *How I Became a Socialist*, he writes, "My first step was...taken in organized labor" with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen. "[S]aturated with the spirit of the working class...I was spurred on in the work of organizing."[21]

At this point, he had heard little of the Socialist movement and found what little he had heard to be unconvincing. But his experience in the Pullman Strike of 1894 would change that opinion. In the first national strike to date, members of the American Railway Union and other workers led by Eugene Debs protested en masse the Pullman Car Company wage cuts, which had been prompted by the Panic of 1893. The boycott lasted months but was broken by a federal crackdown, resulting in Debs's arrest and a tightening of federal union regulations.

This experience was Debs's "first practical lesson in Socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name."[22] And "when the first glimmerings of Socialism were beginning to penetrate," Debs wrote, Victor Berger came to visit him in the Woodstock jail. "[Berger] delivered the first impassioned message of Socialism

[20] Victor Berger, *The Victor L. Berger Papers.*
[21] Eugene V. Debs, "How I Became a Socialist," in *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches,* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 80.
[22] Ibid, 82.

[Debs] had ever heard...to set the 'wires humming in [his] system.'"[23] Although Bellamy was also profoundly influential, for Debs the revelation came with Berger's copy of *Capital* by Marx, which he read during his post-Pullman time in jail.

The power of Berger's oratory was enough to pull Debs across the divide from labor organization to pure socialism. By the end of the nineteenth century, Debs himself would become a great persuasive orator and figurehead for the cause. As he assumed the position of radical leader, he adopted the use of historical rhetoric from immigrant socialists. But his rhetoric and oratory proved more effective, perhaps due to his more sociable personality, or perhaps because he was American with a better understanding of his culture. More so than Berger, Debs could provide an American face and a familiar language to an abstract ideology. On one hand, Debs was translating the foreign into the familiar; on the other, he was rewriting what it meant to be American.

In his writings and speeches Debs made copious references to American history, particularly to his greatest hero, Civil War abolitionist John Brown. In his 1911 article *The Secret of Efficient Expression*, Debs recalled his personal progression in the art of oratory, stating that the rhetoric of John Brown and Wendell Phillips had been most influential in his early studies of history. "I read the speeches of Wendell Phillips," he wrote "and was profoundly stirred by his marvelous powers."[24] He studied closely the abolitionist language and, consequently, similar themes surfaced in his writings.

For these radicals, a very common way to diagnose contemporary social ills was to draw a comparison between the chattel slavery of antebellum America and the wage slavery, as they called it, of postwar industrial capitalism. Chattel slavery had ceased to

---

[23] Ibid, 84.
[24] Eugene V. Debs, "The Secret of Efficient Expression," *The Coming Nation*, (1911) 1-2. marxists.org

exist, they argued, because a more efficient form of exploitation had supplanted it in modern wage labor.

Just as chattel slaves were ultimately emancipated by abolitionists, so too must modern-day wage-slaves be liberated by their own emancipators. In an article entitled *John Brown: History's Greatest Hero*, Debs demands of his readers, "Who shall be the John Brown of Wage-Slavery?"[25] Who, he inquires, will lead a wage-slave insurrection to mirror Brown's slave rebellion at Harpers Ferry?

His audience, however, may have been unfamiliar with this reference. In fact, if the American public even knew who John Brown was, they probably remembered him as a fanatical insurgent who perhaps merited his execution; they would, at least, if they trusted their textbooks. Well before his Presidency, for example, Woodrow Wilson wrote a student's guide to the Civil War entitled *Division and Reunion*, published in 1893, the title alone suggesting his viewpoint.

In a section devoted to John Brown and his attempted slave rebellion at Harpers Ferry, Wilson wrote that Brown acknowledged "no authority but that of his own obstinate will," and obeyed only his personal "conceptions of right, [which were] fanatical almost to the point of madness." Wilson called Harpers Ferry "the most lawless and bloody enterprise of [Brown's] party," with "[a] mad purpose of effecting...a forcible liberation of the slaves." According to Wilson, the failed insurrection and the inevitable death penalty proved that Brown's "plan had been one of the maddest folly."[26]

---

[25] Eugene V. Debs, "John Brown: History's Greatest Hero," in *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches,* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 272.
[26] Wilson, Woodrow, *Division and Reunion: 1829-1889* (New York and London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1893), 202-204.

While Wilson, and America on the whole, admired Brown's conviction, Debs and other radicals mourned Brown's martyrdom and defended his motivations. Rather than commemorating the Civil War's end, radical publications consistently commemorated John Brown's birthday or the anniversary of Harpers Ferry, or mourned the day of his execution.

To continue his emancipationist analogy, Debs declared, "We are today where the abolitionists were in 1858."[27] Delivering this speech in 1908 when the Party was making visible inroads, and when Debs had been campaigning in the U.S. presidential race, he compared his party to the Republicans of the Civil War—how "the time had come for a great change, and the republican party was formed in spite of the bickerings and contentions of men."[28] In 1908, socialists were still an extreme minority. But so had the Republicans been a moral minority at one point.

He further drew a light comparison between himself and President Lincoln: "Lincoln made the great speech in that year that gave him the nomination and afterward made him president of the United States."[29] Although Debs was more concerned with winning numbers to his cause than with the actual Presidency, he nonetheless found this a compelling comparison. Indeed he believed himself a better grassroots orator than a presidential candidate, but that never undermined his conviction that the Socialist Party would prompt the next great social revolution, as had the Republicans.

In 1908, however, few remembered Civil War Republicans as revolutionary. What some, such as Frederick Douglass, had once considered the "Second American

[27] Eugene V. Debs, "The Issue," in *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches,* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 488.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

Revolution," had ultimately been remembered as "a tragedy that forged greater unity...[and] not as the crisis of a nation...still deeply divided over slavery, race, competing definitions of labor, liberty, political economy, and the future of the West."[30]

After the Civil War—after five years of unprecedented bloodshed—Americans, both physically and spiritually devastated, were more apt to let wounds heal than to perpetuate conflict. But David Blight argues that national healing meant forgetting at the expense of justice.[31] Although an emancipationist minority had technically triumphed in the War, the majority would not necessarily be convinced of its mission thereafter. Liberty and equality were not only potentially threatening terms, but also ideals that would require constant nurturing; a maimed and still divided country was perhaps not up to the uncomfortable task of sustaining societal revolution.

Leftist radicals understood the breadth of their struggle as a moral minority; they faced the formidable obstacle of a collective memory that had forgotten, or in some cases even demonized, their legacy. At the same time, they had cause for optimism: Firstly, radicals found a reserve of confidence in the dialectical inevitability of their triumph, as assured by Marx. Secondly, their reading of American history suggested that a persistent moral minority had continually prevailed in changing public opinion and overcoming injustice achieved all progress. Had America not been founded upon revolutionary ideals, they asked? Had George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln not been revolutionaries? If anything was American, socialists and anarchists argued, it was radicalism.

---

[30] Blight, 387.
[31] Blight, 57.

To make this claim more appealing, Debs modified his basic understanding of Marxist socialism to cater to tangible struggles that he himself had faced as an industrial American worker. Although he did not consider himself a Christian, for example, he understood the value of Christian language, notably using Jesus Christ as the archetypical socialist.[32] Debs understood what working-class Americans wanted and needed to hear: not clouded proletarian jargon, but communitarian and vaguely religious language that would resonate with traditional small-town values. As historian James Weinstein puts it, he "personally embodied the unity of populist, Christian, Marxist and militant trade unions that fused to form the Socialist Party [of America]."[33] Religion, which many European radicals neglected if not belittled, was an important element of American history and culture, and an integral element of successful rhetoric.

The movement had undoubtedly assumed its American form by the end of the century. With the help of new converts, socialism was translated into English, and further into comprehensible American terms. Although the radical spectrum was quite ideologically divided, many American socialists were still dedicated to working and reforming within the democratic system; they were prepared to galvanize unions, utopians, and longstanding agricultural alliances, recognizing that most of America's labor strength resided in these pre-existing groups.

5. Auspicious Steps: The S.P.A., Radical Propaganda and Memory

The most auspicious step for the future of socialism was made in 1901. Debs, at this point leader of the Socialist Democratic Party, merged his movement with an immigrant wing of the Socialist Labor Party, consisting largely of De Leon's opponents

[32] Eugene V. Debs, "Jesus the Supreme Leader," *Progressive Woman* (1914), 22-29. marxists.org
[33] James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 12.

such as Latvian-born Morris Hillquit, to form the Socialist Party of America. It was under the reign of the SPA that Socialists accomplished the most in America.

In the presidential race of 1912, for example, Debs received an impressive 6 percent of the total vote, "a figure never again equaled by a Socialist candidate."[34] A great number of Americans had obviously been convinced of the Socialist cause. This fact is also reinforced by the readership of Socialist literature. Of the scores of Socialist publications, the *Appeal to Reason*, a key source of propagation for the party, reached close to 150,000 in 1902[35] and 761,747 per week by 1913.[36] Based out of small-town Girard, Kansas, this journal featured writers from Helen Keller to Jack London and covered topics of everyday concern for the American working class.

In any one of these weekly issues of the *Appeal*, striking articles bearing emancipationist titles jump off the page: "Lincoln the Revolutionist," "John Brown's Birthday" or "Wendell Phillips' Platform," to name a few. One article appearing in June of 1909, entitled "A Millionaire Predicts Civil War," bases this prediction on parallels between the worlds of chattel and wage slavery. In another article, "Fooling the Wage Slave," one Marion Fulton writes, "...We may draw an analogy. Instead of the beneficent slave owner, we now have the arrogant capitalists, and in place of the...chattel slave, we have the discontented and "free only to starve" wage slave." [37]

As these journals became more popular, more American conversion stories continued to appear. Kate Richards O'Hare wrote "How I Became a Socialist Agitator" in 1908; her family's ranch had been sold after a string of economic panics, and after

---

[34] Weinstein, *The Decline,* 93.
[35] Spartacus Educational, "Appeal to Reason," http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/
[36] Weinstein, *The Decline*, 85.
[37] *Appeal to Reason*, Microfilm, Kansas, MO, 1895-1917, reel 3, Feb 1909, (accessed at Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, December 2007).

moving to Kansas City she joined temperance and union movements. Then she met the legendary labor radical Mother Jones, read various pamphlets and papers (specifically *The Appeal to Reason*), and converted to Socialism.[38] She was one of many men and women to undergo this sort of experience. Socialism was one of the most promising sources of hope for the weary workers of America.

In addition to journals and newspapers, radicals also distributed small pamphlets with simple themes and essays on socialism, history and labor that were widely distributed and read. "Little Blue Books," inexpensive pocket paperbacks, became a popular way of disseminating basic ideas to a wide audience. With titles such as "Karl Marx and the Civil War," "The Socialism of Jesus," and "Abraham Lincoln and the Working Class,"[39] the basic themes of American socialism were becoming more accessible, and the radical understanding of American history more prevalent.

The attempt to create a new collective memory with socialism at the center of American history inspired a number of new history texts, especially as the Party continued to grow. Not only were radicals looking forward for change, but they were also looking backward for validation. Immigrants and natives alike wrote histories of radicalism in America, so as to give the movement stronger roots. These histories were characterized by a resurrection, reinterpretation and integration of some forgotten people and events.

Within eight years, three notable examples of socialist history emerged: Debs' brief *The American Movement*, first published in *The Appeal to Reason* in 1908; Frederic Heath's *A Brief History of Socialism in America* of 1900; and finally Morris Hillquit's

[38] Kate Richards O'Hare, "How I Became a Socialist Agitator," *The Socialist Woman* (October 1908), http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/kro/doc001.htm
[39] Leonard H. Axe Library, "Checklist of the Little Blue Books," http://library.pittstate.edu/spcoll/hj-lbb-1.html

390-page *History of Socialism in the United States*, published in 1903. They essentially divide the story into two broad periods: early utopian socialism and modern socialism. Heath further divided his history into seven sub-sections, dating as far back as 1776 with "communistic ventures of the Shakers, Rappites, and Zoarites"[40] up to modern day Social Democracy.

All three authors suggested that the inclination toward utopianism was a tradition: they pointed to Puritans, to latter settlers in America like Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, and to movements such as the Brook Farm colony of the prior century, inhabited by the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry D. Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Early utopian experiments were the precursors to socialism; "All of them," Debs wrote, "had democratic instincts and perceived more or less clearly the drift of time, the tendency toward collective society, industrial freedom and social justice."[41]

Then, as Marx and Engels were formulating their ideas in Europe, agitators in America were pressing for slave emancipation and America was advancing toward its Civil War. Men like Horace Greeley, abolitionist and editor of the *New York Tribune*, unofficial organ of the Republican Party, further laid the groundwork for socialism. "The power of Greeley's influence in the early history of Socialist movement in America, when hate and persecution were aroused by the mere mention of it, has never yet been fairly recognized...[he] was in the true sense a Labor Leader."[42] Debs also cited a biographer of Greeley who wrote that "[the] subject of Greeley's oratory is one alone... It is the 'Emancipation of Labor,' its emancipation from ignorance, vice, servitude,

[40] Frederick Heath, "A Brief History of Socialism in America," *Social Democracy Redbook*, (Terre Haute, IN: Debs Publishing Co., 1900) 1-75. marxisthistory.org
[41] Eugene V. Debs, "The American Movement," in *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches,* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 98.
[42] Ibid, 100.

insecurity, poverty."[43] For Debs, then, ideas of socialism, even if not explicitly Marxist, already existed in America when German socialists arrived in the 1850s.

Given the nation's tradition of utopian and trade union movements, the people should be ready for socialism, which was not merely an idea imported by old guard Germans, but something entirely compatible with American needs—a fresh solution to a long-standing problem of labor exploitation. According to these histories, not only were the seeds of socialism historically planted, but also the social conditions were ripe for a mass movement. These histories provided a justification for both the past and present of radicalism, and suggested a promising future.

While some justified socialism through historical narrative, others tried fiction. Just after Hillquit's chronicle, Upton Sinclair published his Civil War chronicle *Manassas* in 1904. Renowned as an independent muckraking journalist with a progressivist agenda, Sinclair actively supported the Socialist cause, frequently contributed to Socialist publications, and was yet one more indication that the movement was speaking to Americans. Sinclair and his work *The Jungle*, which had been commissioned by and serialized in the *Appeal to Reason*, aroused one of the greater social awakenings since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Manassas*, on the other hand, reached a much smaller audience.

Although unsuccessful in sales and wanting in stylistic command, *Manassas* today provides a unique radical perspective on the Civil War. Set on the Montague plantation in antebellum Mississippi, conveniently bordering the land of Jefferson Davis, the novel begins as Grandfather Montague recounts heroic experiences in the War of 1812. His son is a state Senator, and his grandson Allan is the protagonist.

[43] Ibid.

The pith of *Manassas* portrays Allan's conversion from stereotypically ignorant southerner, harboring a hatred and fear of abolitionists, to enlightened abolitionist himself. His father, for health reasons, must move the family to Boston. Upon arrival in the North, Allan is so startled to encounter the saintly Levi Coffin, "reputed founder of the 'Underground Railroad,'"[44] that he drops the pocketknife he had been carrying for protection against abolitionists:

> "I have just come from Mississippi," said Allan, with desperate resolution; "my cousin gave me that knife so that if I met an Abolitionist—why—why—"
>
> He hesitated. ...[H]is Quaker auditor...put a look of much gravity, and laid his hand upon Allan's shoulder, and said, "Then, my son, thee may begin with me; for I am an Abolitionist!...Thee had perhaps never seen an abolitionist before?"...
>
> "No, sir," stammered the boy...
>
> "Try to meet some of them some day," said the other; "they are the best people in the world, believe me...Suppose, for instance, some wicked man were to steal thee and...degrade thee into a chattel...like the beasts that perish, thee could find no one to pleas for the save only among the Abolitionists!"[45]

Frequenting his abolitionist aunt and uncle in Boston, Allan is repeatedly frustrated in the attempt to justify his southern position on slavery. In time, Allan sees Frederick Douglass speak, reads *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, meets abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy and witnesses the famous rendezvous between John Brown and Frederick Douglass. After so much exposure to emancipationist rhetoric, Allan converts almost unwillingly to the abolitionist cause. He is riddled with anguish for opposing his family and his southern heritage, but his conversion represents his acceptance of a painful truth and the triumph of the abolitionist crusade. He eventually joins the Union army to defend his newfound conviction. Through the voice of Allan's uncle, Sinclair notes, "All the old

[44] Upton Sinclair, *Manassas: A Novel of the War* (Pasadena: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 51.
[45] Ibid.

patriots saw it perfectly...And they all hated Slavery, too. Patrick Henry and Washington and Jefferson were everyone one of the Abolitionists."[46]

This largely neglected novel is paradigmatic of radical American Civil War memory. Sinclair's portrait not only canonized radical abolitionists, but did so with patriotic, nationalistic language. He simultaneously sanctified past radicals while invoking the reader's American patriotism, implying that Civil War memory was not always simply reconciliationist *or* emancipationist, but was for many a combination of the two. Sinclair proved that radicalism, as in the case of the abolitionists, was not seditious but was conversely an American tradition sanctioned by time and hindsight.

Manassas was likely intended to remind Americans that radical progressivism was well-intended and historically justified, but perhaps also that war, although undesirable, was sometimes necessary—that nothing was more important than preservation of the Union and what it embodied: liberty and equality. This conviction would prove problematic in later years.

While many radicals were writing histories of the "great men" who emancipated slaves in the Civil War, and others were fabricating fictional converts like Sinclair's Allan Montague, still others had non-fictional memories vested in the Civil War and post-Civil War era. In a biographical sketch of his father, leading American socialist Algernon Lee gives a more personalized rendition of the Civil War experience.

James Lee had spent some time in New York during the years preceding the Civil War, where he encountered the likes of Henry Ward Beecher and *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley. He wrote that, "[a]lthough my father afterward disliked Greeley's attitude toward President Lincoln during the war...I believe that for a number of years the

[46] Ibid, 76

Tribune's editorials had a considerable influence on his ways of thinking."[47] Lee explained that his father's stay in New York made him neither radical abolitionist, nor Fourierite, nor an active partisan; yet he was still influenced enough to break "with both the political and the religious faith of the people among whom he had grown up," joining the new Republican Party, much like Sinclair's fictional Allan.

And like Allan, James Lee joined the Union army at the outset of war. His son wrote, "My father thought...that a young man who disapproved of chattel slavery and valued the life of the Republic, and who on those grounds had voted to put Lincoln at the head of the government at so critical a time, ought to help him at a time of need in maintaining its authority."[48]

Although not an admitted radical, James Lee set the example for his son. Algernon Lee, a Minnesota native, was a key player on the radical scene at the turn of the century, editing various socialist journals and eventually becoming the Director of Education at a new school for social sciences, The Rand School. Evidently, radicals did not stop short at rewriting history; they wanted to impart it directly to a new generation of students.

Unhappy with the capitalist indoctrination they found at the heart of public schools, Socialists founded the new Rand School, with support from the likes of historian Charles Beard and Morris Hillquit.[49] Radicals founded their own institutions to inculcate workers and students with a stronger sense of class-consciousness and a better, newer

---

[47] Algernon Lee. *The Algernon Lee Papers.* Tamiment 014, Microfilm Reel 61 (1872-1956), (accessed at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, December 2007).
[48] Ibid.
[49] Andrew H. Lee, "The Tamiment Library," *London Socialist Historians Newsletter* (September 2004), http://www.londonsocialisthistorians.org/newsletter/articles.pl/noframes/read/98

understanding of history. This was the radicals' greatest attempt yet to reconstruct collective memory.

6. Other Movements: Anarchism and Black Radicalism

Socialists were not the only radicals hoping to write themselves into history books (or re-write the books entirely), or to erect institutions to shape the American mentality. Around the same time that socialists founded the Rand School in 1906, anarchist and black radical movements were embarking upon similar projects. The anarchist Ferrer, or Modern, School, for example, was founded only five years later in New York. The Rand School lived well into the 1950s, although the New York Modern School would have a much shorter lifespan. Both, however, demonstrated an experimental approach to education.

If the prevailing collective memory steers politics, then radicals would surely have a vested interest in the way history courses were taught. Voltairine de Cleyre, American-born intellectual powerhouse for the anarchist movement, defended the anarchist position in her 1908 essay *Anarchism and American Traditions.* As she understood it,

> "It was the intention of the Revolutionists to establish a system of common education, which should make the teaching of history one of its principal branches; not with the intent of burdening the memories of our youth with the dates of battles or the speeches of generals...but with the intent that every American should know to what conditions the masses of the people had been brought by the operation of certain institutions, by what means they had wrung out their liberties, and how those liberties again and again been filched from them by the use of governmental force, fraud, and privilege."[50]

A radical revolutionist herself, de Cleyre was much more interested in the country's revolutionary origins, and less so in the Civil War schism. To justify her

[50] Voltairine de Cleyre, "Anarchism and American Traditions," *Mother Earth Bulletin*, December 1908 (New York, Greenwood Reprint Corp., 1968), 347.

marginal and rather ostracized movement, she found parallels between her breed of anarchism and the anarchist spirit of America's founding fathers, arguing that the anarchists were in fact preserving the country's original ideals.

While many socialists related to Civil War emancipationists like Lincoln, who had been both radical and an advocate of a strong central government, anarchists were more drawn to early Republic revolutionaries, and were more strictly anti-establishment. Although early American revolutionaries were both rebels and state-builders like Lincoln, anarchists chose to underline the more radical elements that the rest of America had apparently forgotten.

De Cleyre lamented in her essay that students "have no idea why it should have been called a 'revolution.' "...[The] name 'American Revolution' is held sacred, though it means to them nothing more than successful force, while the name 'Revolution' applied to a further possibility is a spectre detested and abhorred."[51] The reconciliationist mentality of the populace had thus reached a point where the historical significance of the word 'revolution' had lost all meaning. Likewise, the idea of the Civil War as the "Second American Revolution" had been almost entirely forgotten.

According to de Cleyre, her society's emphasis on unity at all costs, and its pervasive fear of rebellion and controversy, were obvious departures from the early American ideal. One defining illustration of this split in the national memory of the Revolution was in the competing views of Thomas Paine: while de Cleyre, at age 19, was giving inspirational speeches about her hero, Theodore Roosevelt was dismissing the same man as no more than a "dirty little atheist."

[51] Ibid.

Nevertheless, de Cleyre cites men like Thomas Jefferson to remind her readers that dissent, even anarchism, is not un-American, although often stigmatized as such, but *is* American by definition, as the country was founded via revolution: "God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion!" she quotes, "What country can preserve its liberties if its rulers are not warned from time to time that the people preserve the power of resistance?"[52] Thus sanctioned by Jefferson, radical criticism of the government was not only permissible, but a citizen's duty.

Anarchists like Voltairine de Cleyre were not exclusively interested in Revolutionary War figures. In the most popular anarchist publication, Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth*, one finds familiar references to Civil War abolitionists, often through the voice of immigrant writers. For example, in *Wendell Phillips The Agitator*, Prussian-born Max Baginsky criticized the American public for having forgotten so important a man. He emphasized that despite being ostracized and even vilified, Phillips agitated persistently for "the enlightenment and emancipation of the people."[53] He drew a striking comparison:

> "As wage slavery is to-day, so was black slavery then considered a God-anointed institution. The language, misrepresentations and calumnies used against the Abolitionists are almost identical with those hurled at the Anarchists in the present day."[54]

Baginsky implied that Americans should not be so quick to discount anarchism, as it was historically and morally comparable to abolitionism. Later, in August of 1912, he published a similar article entitled *John Brown: Direct Actionist.*

---

[52] Thomas Jefferson as cited in [Ibid].
[53] Max Baginsky, "Wendell Phillips the Agitator," *Mother Earth Bulletin*, Series I, Vol 6, November 1911 (New York, Greenwood Reprint Corp., 1968), 266.
[54] Ibid.

> "What is most necessary nowadays, when it is so urgent to wake the people from their stupor and to inspire them with confidence in their own strength and initiative, is the example of men and women who with high idealism combined the will to act... [At] an early age [John Brown] hated slavery, and later grew to despise everything that bore the odor of politics... To take up arms, with small means and few comrades, against the institution of slavery...he did not consider that anything extraordinary. He thought it inevitable and simple.[55]"

Baginsky beckoned Americans to the inevitable simplicity of revolution by mingling anarchist and patriotic language. Americans needed a new source of inspiration, and radicals found the source to be historical revolutionaries like John Brown.

7. John Brown: Maniac, Martyr or Mutineer ?

A case study in collective memory has emerged from the various interpretations of John Brown. Wilson's derogatory language portrays a popular sentiment toward insurgency and rebellion, dismissing Brown as simply mad. Eugene Debs remembered Brown as a prophet martyred for a cause, who led a peaceful life and a dutiful insurrection. Anarchists like Baginsky, on the other hand, remembered him as a fiery "direct actionist," who championed the necessity of violence in inciting change. But while radicals of all stripes worked to write John Brown into the collective memory, they were singularly silent about the most radical meaning of his mission, his assault on his country's race prejudice.

Perhaps it is the very lack of words regarding the ongoing African-American civil rights struggle that speaks loudest or, in some cases, the outward racism. Victor Berger, although obviously a defender of his western European heritage, was nonetheless notorious for his racism toward East Asians. And Kate Richards O'Hare openly supported segregation in her 1912 pamphlet "'Nigger' Equality." Although Debs was

[55] Max Baginsky, "John Brown: Direct Actionist," *Mother Earth Bulletin,* Series I, Vol 7, August 1912 (New York, Greenwood Reprint Corp., 1968), 182.

concerned with what was then called the "Negro Problem" or the "Color Question," he ultimately concluded that any race problem was more or less a symptom of class inequity, essentially overlooking the injustices felt uniquely by African-Americans.

But in truth, most Americans felt ethnic and religious ties more acutely than class-consciousness, and "[c]lass consciousness in the workplace was secondary to ethnicity as a basis for organization and political activity."[56] Casting race problems in the shadow of class economics was a misunderstanding of American society, and one possible reason why radical movements failed: the negligence of racial issues alienated blacks, and the emphasis on class-consciousness seemed irrelevant to feuding ethnic groups. In the Jim Crow environment of Plessy v. Ferguson and reconstruction apartheid, the civil rights movement was a unique force to be reckoned with. It was thus left to this strand of emancipationist radicalism to center race in the memory of America's radical past.

There was no better a voice on the issue than Harvard scholar and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois. Writing in 1913, the year of the Civil War semicentennial celebration at Gettysburg, Du Bois concluded in *The New Review*, a socialist weekly, that "[no] recent convention of Socialists has dared to face fairly the Negro problem and make a straightforward declaration that they regard Negroes as men in the same sense that other persons are."[57] If socialists hoped to unite working people behind a collective memory, Du Bois stressed, it would have to be one that negotiated this racial divide.

In the same year that Du Bois wrote this article, Woodrow Wilson not only gave an inspirational reconciliationist speech at Gettysburg but the "progressive" president

[56] Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001): 131.
[57] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Socialism and the Negro Problem," *The New Review: A Weekly Review of International Socialism* (February 1, 1913). http://www.webdubois.org/

also instituted segregation on the federal level,[58] corroborating Blight's point that reconciliation came at the cost of emancipation. While the country was coalescing geographically, the population was consequently growing more racially divided. So while Du Bois sympathized with socialist ideology, he still saw shortcomings in its failure to recognize what was a distinctly black struggle.

Du Bois was not commemorating the Civil War in 1913, but was partaking in another semicentennial celebration around that time. In 1906, the Niagara Movement, a civil rights group led by Du Bois, met publicly for the first time in America at Harpers Ferry.[59] Their concern was not for the emancipation of wage-slaves, but the continued fight for black emancipation that had begun at Harpers Ferry fifty years prior, and had yet to become reality. As the rest of the country celebrated the end of the Civil War, this Niagara minority commemorated the violent beginning of a long-term struggle.

For Wilson and his spectators, the fast fifty years had "meant peace and union and vigor, and the maturity and might of a great nation. How wholesome and healing," Wilson cried, "the peace has been!...How complete the union has become."[60] At Harpers Ferry, on the other hand, Du Bois argued that the war was not yet over and the wounds had not yet healed: "[Here] on the scene of John Brown's martyrdom we reconsecrate ourselves...to the final emancipation of the race which John Brown died to make free."[61]

The five-day Niagara meeting at Harpers Ferry included a day devoted to the insurrection martyr, appropriately called "John Brown's Day." Several biographies of

---

[58] Kathleen Wolgemuth, " Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation," *The Journal of Negro History*, 158-173, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1959), http://www.jstor.org/ (accessed April 4, 2008).
[59] National Park Service, "Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry Centennial Commemoration," http://www.nps.gov/archive/hafe/niagara/history.htm (accessed April 4, 2008).
[60] The American Presidency Project, "Woodrow Wilson: Address at Gettysburg" (July 4, 1913), http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65370 (accessed April 4, 2008).
[61] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Address to the Nation," http://www.wfu.edu/~zulick/341/niagara.html

Brown existed at the time, but three years after the Niagara celebration, Du Bois published his own, devoting special attention to Brown's rapport with the blacks with whom he had worked. The biography, in Du Bois' words, "is at once a record of and a tribute to the man who of all Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk."[62] For Du Bois, Brown's radicalizing experience was crossing the racial divide, working not just for but also with blacks

Du Bois' biography of John Brown is a 300-page homage to the agitator's legacy, especially his ability to communicate with the slave community. Perhaps it is also, then, a reminder to other radicals that in order live up to their claims of radical equality, they must traverse the racial divide, as did Brown. Perhaps Du Bois, Debs and De Cleyre had a common enemy. Yet they never met the opposition as a unified force, and the civil rights movement would arguably be the only successful cause in the years to come, as Blight suggests. Indeed Du Bois indicated a fatal weakness in the radical attempt to unite behind a usable past: as long as racial division persisted, radical unity would be impossible, and a divided movement would falter in the face of an impending modern war.

8. The Great War and the Death of Radicalism

Just as a fragmented radical movement would falter in the face of opposition, a divided country could not survive a war, and the prospect of American involvement in Europe demanded national unity. The democratic attitude that had given James Lee cause to support Lincoln also characterized the populace around WWI. Woodrow Wilson was the president, and although he had campaigned on a pacifist platform, he and his war must be supported as such. In the fifty years succeeding the Civil War, the

[62] W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown*, (Millwood, NY: Krauss-Thomson Organization Limited, 1973), 8.

emphasis on reunion had permeated society and morphed into a form of nationalism that reigned supreme. Union was not simply a prevailing mentality, but an imperative. Meanwhile, manifestations of the emancipationist undercurrent were strictly verboten.

This emphasis on unity conversely meant a vilification of radicals and what they represented. Already sensing heightened radical pressure both abroad and at home, and fearing any dissent that may contribute to an American defeat, Wilson urged Congress to pass a series of censorship laws including the Espionage Act of June 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, which would both serve to stifle radical leftists.

Alexander Mitchell Palmer, Wilson's Attorney General instigated a series of raids against radicals deemed dangerous. It was with Palmer's encouragement, in fact, that Wilson had attended the Gettysburg semi-centennial to deliver his nationalistic speech.[63] This draconian period of repression, or the First Red Scare, culminated in the imprisonment and deportation of countless radicals, including Rose Pastor Stokes, Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.

Radicals themselves were at an impasse: despite their efforts, it seemed that the emancipationist vision was simply irreconcilable with Americanism, and they were forced to choose what was more important, their ideology or their country. Critics argued that "in spite of [the] periodic emphasis on 'Americanization,' the radical movement...remained fundamentally oriented toward European questions and developments rather than American ones."[64] A successful Americanization process would have required a certain degree of nationalism, so the international emphasis of radical movements precluded domestic success.

---

[63] Blight, 7.
[64] Lipset, 156.

Ultimately, many radicals like Debs chose to stand behind their movement rather than their country, and thus pay the heavy consequences. Anarchist Emma Goldman, one of the most outspoken women in American history, was vehemently anti-conscription and intensely opposed to Wilson's military "preparedness" doctrine. Even in her anti-war propaganda, Goldman refers to early revolutionaries. Nationalists and nativists had commonly cried "America first"—denouncing both immigrant radicals and their threatening international alliances, but Goldman responded:

> "The very proclaimers of "America first" have long before this betrayed the fundamental principles of real Americanism, of the kind of Americanism that Jefferson had in mind when he said that the best government is that which governs least; the kind of America that David Thoreau worked for when he proclaimed that the best government is the one that doesn't govern at all; or the other truly great Americans who aimed to make of this country a haven of refuge, who hoped that all the disinherited and oppressed people in coming to these shores would give character, quality and meaning to the country."[65]

Those "fundamental principles of real Americanism" of the American Revolution had, as de Cleyre once feared, lost all meaning save some vague, patriotic overtones. Under the Espionage Act in 1917, "The producer of a movie called *The Spirit of '76*, about the American Revolution, was sentenced to ten years in prison for promoting anti-British feeling at a time when England and the U.S. were allies..."[66] If something so innocuous as the American Revolution was controversial terrain, radicals stood little chance at successfully inveighing against the World War.

While Goldman fought and lost against Wilson, countless other radicals defected from their causes. Moderates like Upton Sinclair left the Party in 1917 to support American involvement in WWI, along with many other moderate American Socialists

---

[65] Emma Goldman, "Preparedness: The Road to Universal Slaughter," *Mother Earth Bulletin*, Vol. X, No 10 (December 1915), sunsite.berkeley.edu

[66] Howard Zinn, *Howard Zinn on History*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 215.

like journalist Charles Edward Russell. For many radical recruits, American allegiance outstripped the radical commitment to pacifism and internationalism. Although they heeded the calls for reform, they must have ultimately sensed a failure to defend and promote distinctly American institutions.

In the end, radicals failed to capture the support of the majority of Americans. It indeed marked a failure to reshape America's collective memory, but that failure was almost institutionally assured by the indomitable two party system and internal strife within the radical movement itself. On Christmas Day of 1921, Debs was released from jail only to face yet another casualty of the Great War—his radical vision.

Socialism and anarchism were never widely accepted within the democratic political system, but both still managed to prompt much change on the whole. Ironically, Socialists slipped as a party, even as many of their demands were being instituted; the two main parties adopted diluted Socialist planks, appealing to middle class progressives and moderate radicals alike. The progressive movement itself can be seen as a mild adoption and reinterpretation of radical demands. Yet the victor in the battle for memory and ideology, as Blight illustrates, was once again the reconciliationist mentality. America on the whole was still not ready for emancipation.

Hence came the end of this rather brief radical period of American history. Although often remembered as the "Progressive Era," events at the turn-of-the-century in fact reaffirmed the impossibility of third party success. The legacy of these radicals was not forgotten, however. Leftist radicalism lived well into the fifties where it was confronted again by a Red Scare, and then experienced its most pronounced resuscitation in the mid-twentieth-century social revolution, as Blight tells.

He concludes, "Beleaguered but hardly invisible, emancipationist memory lived on to fight another day...Because it would take another political revolution and the largest mass movement for human rights in our history to crush the nation's racial apartheid system that had been forged out of the reunion, the first fifty years of remembering the Civil War was but a prelude to future reckonings.

All memory is prelude."

The American story of Emma Goldman ends in 1919 with a desperate deportation address at Ellis Island, and although she was profoundly disillusioned by this end, at the age of 65 she concluded her essay "Was My Life Worth Living?" with a decisive "yes."

> "On coming to America," she wrote,
> "I had the same hopes as have most European immigrants and the same disillusionment, though the latter affected me more keenly... Yet I do not despair of American life. On the contrary, I feel that the freshness of the American approach and the untapped stores of intellectual and emotional energy resident in the country offer much promise for the future. The War has left in its wake a confused generation ... If I had my life to live over again...I should wish to alter minor details. But in any of my more important actions and attitudes I would repeat my life as I have lived it. I think my life and my work have been successful."[67]

This is not to end on a falsely optimistic note, but is rather meant to illustrate the ambiguity of memory and mentality. At the time of deportation, Goldman may have felt acutely the impossibility of anarchism in America. But in hindsight she could recognize the impact she had made as an individual, and still expressed hope for the future. Likewise, while many continued to consider socialism un-American, much of its program became an integral part of the modern liberal state.

[67] Emma Goldman, "Was My Life Worth Living?" *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (1934). sunsite.berkeley.edu

Just as these radicals remembered American Revolutionary heroes and Civil War abolitionists, following generations of radicals would remember the likes of Goldman and Debs as moral martyrs; time and hindsight would once again be on the side of this radical minority. Although textbooks still concede little attention to radical movements of the turn of the century, scores of revisionist histories began surfacing in the 1960s and continue today. This attests to the fact that the emancipationist vision championed by these radicals never triumphed over reconciliation, but it has indeed been heard, has been influential, and has not been forgotten.

As Emma Goldman sailed away from Ellis Island, the statue of liberty fading from sight, Americans breathed a sigh of relief and continued their project of reunion. But a small minority may have seen in Goldman something of a John Brown, and fought to preserve her legacy as yet another of America's great emancipation martyrs.

Works Cited

Primary

Algernon Lee. *The Algernon Lee Papers.* Tamiment 014, Microfilm Reel 61 (1872-1956), (accessed at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, December 2007).

Appeal to Reason. 1895-1917. Kansas, MO. Microfilm reel 3 (accessed at Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, December 2007).

Baginsky, Max. "Wendell Phillips the Agitator." *Mother Earth Bulletin.* New York: Greenwood Reprint Corp., 1968.

Baginski, Max. "John Brown, Direct Actionist." *Mother Earth Bulletin.* New York: Greenwood Reprint Corp., 1968.

Berger, Victor. *The Victor L. Berger papers: Speeches & Writings.* Scholarly Resources Inc. Reel 28. 1901-1919. (Accessed at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives).

De Cleyre, Voltairine. "Anarchism and American Traditions." *Mother Earth Bulletin* (December 1908): 344-350. New York: Greenwood Reprint Corp., 1968.

De Leon, Daniel. "That Hoary-Headed Superstition." *The People,* vol. V (1895), http://slp.org/ (accessed October 2007).

Debs, Eugene V. "How I Became a Socialist." In *Debs: His Life Writings and Speeches,* 79-84. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908. Originally published in *New York Comrade* (April 1902).

Debs, Eugene V. "Jesus the Supreme Leader." *Progressive Woman* (1914). http://www.marxists.org/ (accessed October 2007)

Debs, Eugene V. "The Secret of Efficient Expression." *The Coming Nation* (1911): 1-2. http://www.marxists.org/ (accessed October 2007)

Debs, Eugene V. "The Negro and the Class Struggle." *The International Socialist Review*, vol. 4, no. 5 (1903): 257-260. http://www.marxists.org/ (accessed October 2007)

Du Bois, W.E.B. *John Brown.* Millwood, NY: Krauss-Thomson Organization Limited, 1972.

Du Bois, W.E.B.. "Socialism and the Negro Problem." *The New Review: A Weekly Review of International Socialism* (1913), http://www.webdubois.org/ (accessed October 2007)

Goldman, Emma and Alexander Berkman. "Deportation: Its Meaning and Menace." New York: Mother Earth Publishing Assoc., 1919. http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/goldman/deportation.html (accessed October 2007)

Goldman, Emma. "Was My Life Worth Living?." *Harper's Monthly Magazine* CLXX (1934), http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/ (accessed October 2007)

Goldman, Emma. "Preparedness: The Road to Universal Slaughter. *Mother Earth Bulletin*, Vol. X, No. 10 (December 1915), http://sunsite3.berkeley.edu/ (accessed October 2007).

Heath, Frederic F. "A Brief History of Socialism in America." *Social Democracy Red Book* (Terre Haute, IN: Debs Publishing Co., 1900): 1-75. www.marxists.org/

Heath, Frederic F.. "How I Became a Socialist." *The Comrade* 2 (1903): 154-155, http://www.marxists.org/ (accessed October 2007).

Kerr, Charles H.. *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908.

Marx, Karl. "Address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America." *The Bee-Hive Newspaper*, no. 169 (1865). http://www.marxists.org/ (accessed April 2008).

O'Hare, Kate Richards. "How I Became a Socialist Agitator." *The Socialist Woman* (October 1908). http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/kro/doc001.htm

O'Hare, Kate Richards. "'Nigger' Equality." *The National Ripsaw* (1912). http://www.marxists.org/ (accessed October 2007).

Sinclair, Upton. *Manassas: A Novel of the War*. Pasadena: The Macmillan Company, 1923.

Wilson, Woodrow. *Epochs of American History: Division & Reunion, 1829-1889*. New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1895.

Secondary

"Appeal to Reason." Spartacus Educational Home Page. http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAappealR.htm (accessed March 2008).

Blight, David W. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002.

Confino, Alon. "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method." *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 5 (1997): 1386-1403. http://www.jstor.org/ (accessed January 2008).

Drinnon, Richard. *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Gilbert, David T. "Niagara Movement at Harpers Ferry Centennial Commemoration." National Park Service. http://www.nps.gov/ (accessed October 2007).

Lee, Andrew H. "The Tamiment Library." *London Socialist Historians Newsletter*, Issue 22, (2004). http://www.londonsocialisthistorians.org/ (accessed October 2007).

Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Gary Marks. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.

Leonard H. Axe Library - Pittsburg State University. "Checklist of the Little Blue Books," http://library.pittstate.edu/spcoll/hj-lbb-1.html (accessed October 2007)..

Moore, Robert Laurence. *European socialists and the American Promised Land.* London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Weinstein, James. *The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967.

Weinstein, James. *The Long Detour: The History and Future of the American Left.* Oxford: Westview Press, 2004.

Wiebe, Robert H.. *The Search for Order, 1877-1920.* New York: Hill And Wang, 1966.

Wolgemuth, Kathleen L. "Woodrow Wilson and Federal Segregation." *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1959): 158-173. http://www.jstor.org/ (accessed January 2008).

Zinn, Howard. *Howard Zinn on History*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001.