

# Charting the ebbs and flows of the US radical Left

Sunday 17 November 2019, by [GEORGAKAS Dan](#) (Date first published: 20 March 2019).

**Why the United States has not developed a permanent socialist movement has perplexed activists and theorists for more than a century. Paul Le Blanc takes up that query as an activist who wants to see an anticapitalist mass movement take shape in twenty-first-century America. To that end, he investigates some of the moments when the possibility of a permanent left presence in America seemed at hand. His focus is on what made those movements viable and what thwarted them from long-term success. With the exception of "Engaging with History," the aptly named preface, *Left Americana's* fourteen essays were written over a period of thirty years—the earliest in 1986; the most recent in 2015. Each essay offers a rich account of a specific topic, but the collection is not meant to be a retelling of the entire American radical tradition.**

One of the finest chapters in *Left Americana* spotlights the Haymarket revolutionaries of 1886. Le Blanc stresses these radicals were leaders of a massive workingclass movement organized as the Chicago section of the

International Working People's Association (IWPA). Formal membership peaked at 3,000 but with a much larger support group. IWPA rallies often had thousands of participants, its largest attracting 35,000 people. The IWPA social network included educational lectures, plays, forums, literary societies, beer gardens, parades, picnics, and concerts. A remarkable 400,000 books, pamphlets, and circulars were distributed in Chicago and nearby venues. Newspapers were published in several languages. *Alarm*, the English-language paper, had an annual circulation of 90,000. Very unusual for the time was that women fully participated at all levels. The most visible were Lizzie M. Swank, assistant editor of the *Alarm*, and Lucy Parsons, who was as prominent as her husband Albert Parsons, the most influential IWPA leader.

IWPA newspapers had a strong anarchist current, but they contained more references to Marx than to Bakunin. More significant than formal ideological systems were the two major factions. The largest, headed by Albert Parsons, placed emphasis on building trade unions that could restructure the economy, an outlook akin to anarcho-syndicalism. Their immediate goal was to win the eight-hour day. A smaller group believed violent direct action was needed. They published instructions on how to make dynamite bombs, and some 400 IWPA members organized shooting clubs and participated in military drills.

The Parsons-oriented group believed all members of their organization should be free to propose tactical and theoretical perspectives. Even though they were uneasy about publishing material on how to make bombs, their commitment to free speech and membership empowerment resulted in such articles being published in IWPA newspapers. At the Haymarket bomb trial, the articles on how to make bombs were cited by the prosecution as proof that Parsons and the other defendants were responsible for the bombing even if they were not active in a hands-on manner.

Le Blanc raises this issue as a problem for any revolutionary formation. His implicit assumption is that only a free-speech structure enables a movement to create an achievable visionary agenda. On the other hand, he suggests that there must be some limits on public expressions that can be used against the organization by the powers that be. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) would later face the same dilemma regarding its public discussion on the meaning and possible necessity of sabotage. As elsewhere in *Left Americana*, Le Blanc is not proposing solutions but calling attention to an unresolved organizational dilemma.

Another substantive chapter deals with Le Blanc's experience in the national offices of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the summer of 1966. He writes of how discouraged he became when he realized that the SDS formal leadership didn't even know who headed some of the local chapters and often issued statements and announced projects without knowing what the local response would be. This casual style had fed SDS's spectacular growth but made it almost inevitable that a sect like Progressive Labor could gain formal control of the organization. The disillusioned membership and the larger SDS support group just walked away. Nor were many attracted by the violent direct-action program of the Weatherman faction, whose initial targets included soldiers, many of whom were draftees.

Social media and other communications innovations have made the question of what limits a revolutionary group should or can impose on adherents even more complex. Le Blanc examines how social media, once considered a haven for anti-authoritarian and grassroots perspectives, has been mastered by the right and by governments. The government's suppression of the IWWA, IWW, CP, and the Occupy Wall Street movement was made palatable by rationales in mass media that dampened public protest.

A number of essays deal with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), in which Le Blanc was once a member. During the Vietnam War era, the SWP and its Young Socialist Alliance youth group had a membership of over 2,000, a weekly paper, a publishing company, and wide recognition as antiwar activists. The time seemed ripe for the SWP to blossom into a mass movement. Le Blanc patiently explains how the SWP disintegrated via a series of expulsions.

The strategic and theoretical positions taken by the various SWP factions are presented as policy alternatives without speculations regarding the psychological motivations or ambitions of the individuals involved. The vanguard party structure as practiced by the SWP made expulsion of dissidents, even founders of the party, relatively simple. Eventually a single authoritarian leader, Jack Barnes, came to dominate the group. Membership dwindled rapidly when Barnes linked the SWP program to the policies of Cuba as formulated by Fidel Castro. This course is ironic given that the SWP was originally formed by expelled members of the Communist Party who had challenged the CPUSA's subservience to the policies of the USSR as formulated by Joseph Stalin, its authoritarian leader.

Vanguard parties that have won power or been granted power (USSR, Vietnam, Cuba, Cambodia, Albania, North Korea, Romania, etc.) have all ended in dictatorships. A conclusion based on this history is that the vanguard party's authoritarian structures and emphasis on discipline can only result in authoritarian governance. Le Blanc, however, like many others associated with Trotskyist organizations, retains the belief that vanguard parties can be stripped of their authoritarian culture and argues that specific writings of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky provide guidelines for doing so.

Race issues—a theme throughout *Left Americana*—are highlighted by a detailed essay on the thought of C. L. R. James, and two essays on the socialist beliefs of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his closest associates. Although there is nothing newly revealed about King's model, Le Blanc firmly establishes King as a Christian socialist rather than the sanitized single-issue reformer presented in

mainstream media.

Le Blanc reaffirms the role of C. L. R. James as a key thinker and activist who argued that race and class issues are inseparable. In like manner, James did not separate Black history and culture from white history and culture but examined how each interacted and blended throughout recorded history. Another important theme is how James moved from a vanguard party orientation to a quasi-anarchist or anarcho-socialist perspective that stressed grassroots control. Le Blanc could have written more about James's profound, if often indirect impact, on Black radicals of the 1960s who sought a nonreligious alternative to the King movement and the traditional vanguard party. This influence was particularly strong in Detroit.

The collection's first essay reviews the speculations of a host of international and American thinkers about the failure of socialist mass movements in America. Among those whose ideas are thoughtfully examined are Werner Sombart, Selig Perlman, Karl Kautsky, James Boggs, Eleanor Marx, Bertram Wolfe, and Paul Sweezy. The consensus that emerges is that American capitalism has managed to combine a modest standard of living for most of its citizens with a sense that unlimited social and economic advancement is possible for anyone possessing sufficient zeal. Racism, xenophobia, and sexism are deftly employed to undermine class solidarity; and military and/or judicial force is applied whenever an anticapitalist formation becomes threatening.

Le Blanc bluntly states that at present there is not even an "embryo" or "nucleus" for a revolutionary organization. Consequently, activism must be in the form of united fronts, study of past left movements in America, and "serious minded" debate on how to balance discipline and freedom while retaining the efficiency required for victory. There is an excellent chapter on Brookwood Labor College and references to the Highlander Center that elaborate on the need for formal training of organizers. Duly noted is that the most recognized Brookwood grad was the legendary Ella Baker, and among Highlander's students was Rosa Parks. Le Blanc feels renewed emphasis on the specifics of organizing must include strategies on how to use the new communications technology for socialist ends.

Americans seeking to form an anticapitalist movement have been disheartened by the gruesome failure of traditional vanguard parties. The alternative parliamentary route taken by social democratic formations has won significant reforms but has always lacked the conviction to proceed beyond those reforms. The transnational corporations that now dominate the capitalist system are not much concerned with national interests or conventional political empires. To date, those forces are willing to accept a few worker-controlled factories and various cooperatives and collectives as long as they remain economically locked into the present system. Contemporary identity-based and single-issue movements are treated in similar fashion.

*Left Americana* offers an open-minded overview of select experiences and thinkers in the context of "what is to be done" in America. Le Blanc does not seek or offer a formula; he simply asks that leftists think anew about what kind of revolutionary organization can overcome the global triumph of capitalism. How can an organization be thoroughly democratic yet disciplined enough to be successful without just replicating the authoritarian society it wishes to replace? What specific national factors must American radicals take into account? The only given in Le Blanc's view is that a viable American left must exemplify the values and governance of the new society it advocates.

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