"Economic Facts Are Stronger Than Politics": Friedrich Engels, American Industrialization, and Class Consciousness

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"Economic facts are stronger than politics, especially if the politics are so much mixed up with corruption as in America" (MEW, vol. 37, 48; MECW, vol. 48, 172). Asserting this claim in a letter of 1888, Engels believed that the United States would finally succumb to the pressing logic of free trade. The inexorable laws of markets would not only force the rising industrial giant to shed its protective tariffs but also recast its working class into a revolutionary force. By embracing its historic role as global competitor, reasoned Engels, an intensified American capitalism would in turn forge a socialist worker's party. But were economic determinants stronger than politics? Both Engels and Marx assigned the United States a leading role in capitalism's expansion and, concomitantly, in socialist politics. Yet, despite their sustained attention to capitalism in the United States, their prescriptions for working-class solidarity consistently misread American political culture. Its patterns of social mobility, its ethnic and racial differences, and its preindustrial republicanism that lionized small-scale producers constituted significant anomalies that undermined workers' allegiance to socialism. Neither thinker was blind to these features of American life, but they underestimated their persistence and their negative impact on labor politics. Although Engels' knowledge of the United States was extensive, his indomitable belief in capitalism's impending global crisis subordinated America's specific conditions to broader aspirations. In doing so, Engels and Marx held to a European definition of class conflict that poorly fit American circumstances. By surveying Engels' and Marx's texts on American industrialization and political economy over four decades, this chapter traces their evolving viewpoints on American capitalism and Engels' resistance to grapple with the "exceptionalism" of American labor politics.

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J. G. Backhaus et al. (eds.), *200 Years of Friedrich Engels*, The European Heritage in Economics and the Social Sciences 25, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10115-1_9

1 Taking Stock of a Rising Giant

Beginning in the 1840s, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx grasped the importance of the United States and strove to integrate it into their evolving models for capitalist development. For both, the young republic portended leadership in commerce and industry. Engels first articulated his vision of America's "giant steps" in *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* (1845). Against Manchester's social misery, he sketched the economic potential of the United States. "America, with its inexhaustible resources," he wrote, awaited greatness, "with its unmeasured coal and iron fields, with its unexampled wealth of water-power and its navigable rivers, but especially with its energetic, active population." By comparison, he quipped, the "English are phlegmatic dawdlers." With the water-driven mills in New England, "America has in less than ten years created a manufacture which already competes with England in the coarser cotton goods, has excluded the English from the markets of North and South America, and holds its own in China, side by side with England." Based on Manchester's trade and stock reports, he hazarded the prediction: "If any country is adapted to holding a monopoly of manufacture, it is America" (MEGA[1] I/4, 279; MECW, vol. 4, 579–580).

The young Karl Marx was no less informed about American political economy. Because Thomas Paine's Rights of Man (1792) stood in his father's library, one can assume that Marx read the classic early in his life (Sperber 2013, 19). A remark in "The Jewish Question" (1845) further reveals that he was acquainted with Alexis de Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835), the era's seminal work for explaining American government and society (MEW, vol. 1, 352; MECW, vol. 3, 146–174; Mayer 1966, 4). In 1846, Marx co-authored a polemic against Hermann Kriege, a German journalist in New York, who advocated the "free soil movement." In this pamphlet, Marx flatly rejected Krieg's assertion that the cost-free distribution of land to workers amounted to a communist reform (MEW, vol. 4, 8–11; MECW, vol. 6, 35–51). Marx furthermore addressed American ideals of republicanism, which celebrated a citizen's economic independence and political freedom. For craftsmen and workers, the early introduction of universal (manhood) suffrage in the 1830s played a central, if not decisive, role in their political development. Versed in constitutional history, Marx recognized the value of the franchise that guaranteed claims of liberty and freedom. In the "German Ideology" (1845–46), he noted: "the workers attach so much importance to citizenship, i.e., to active citizenship, that where they have it, for instance in America, they 'make good use' of it, and where they do not have it, they strive to obtain it" (MEGA[2] 1/5, S. 271; MECW, vol. 5, 117ff.). Such constitutional rights shaped the political behavior of American workers over the course of the entire nineteenth century (Bridges 1986, 162, 165, 185–189, 191–196). Forged in the early republic, the credo of political individualism endured, even when large-scale industrialization and mass politics beckoned for collectivist strategies.

The unearthing of gold in California in 1849 fundamentally reframed the American question for Marx and Engels. Still processing the painful setbacks of the

German Revolution of 1848–1849, they labeled the discovery, "the most important thing to have occurred here, more important even than the February Revolution […] one may predict that this discovery will have much more impressive consequences than the discovery of America itself." With rhetoric that resembled new-world boosterism, they declared that the wheel of world history had turned, with global trade taking a new direction: "The role played by Tyre, Carthage and Alexandria in antiquity, and Genoa and Venice in the Middle Ages, the role of London and Liverpool until now—that of the emporia of world trade—is now being assumed by New York and San Francisco, San Juan de Nicaragua, and Leon, Chagres and Panama. The center of gravity of world commerce, Italy in the Middle Ages, England in modern times, is now the southern half of the North American peninsula. The industry and trade of old Europe will have to make huge exertions if they are not to fall into the same decay as the industry and trade of Italy since the sixteenth century, if England and France are not to become what Venice, Genoa and Holland are today" (MEGA^2 I/10, 218; MECW, vol. 10, 265). As a leavening agent for socio-economic upheaval, Marx and Engels welcomed the gold rush.

Over the 1850s, America's economic potential foreshadowed its future leadership in global trends (MEGA^2 I/10, 218 ff.). The economic and financial crisis of 1857–1859 confirmed Marx's thesis that the productive forces had already shifted to the new world. The overheated speculation with banks and railroads initiated a worldwide financial panic, exhibiting synchronized business cycles on both sides of the Atlantic. The instability of capitalism that Friedrich Engels observed in Manchester in 1844, and what Marx predicted in 1848 in the *Communist Manifesto*, now arose in Ohio and New York with full force. For both authors, cyclical overproduction and recurring recessions augured the collapse of capitalism – a mantra that repeatedly arose throughout their lives. Seeing their predictions confirmed in October 1857, Marx exclaimed to Engels: "The American crisis – its outbreak in New York was forecast by us in the November 1850 Revue – is beautiful" (MEGA^2 III/8, 184; MECW, vol. 40, 191). For both, the United States had become a pacemaker for a crisis-ridden capitalism.

But slavery stood in the way of capitalism's full development in North America. As Marx noted in the first volume of *Capital*, "In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded" (MEGA^2 II/5, 239 ff.; MECW, vol. 35, 305). Building on that claim, he prophesized, "As in the eighteenth century, the American War of Independence sounded the tocsin for the European middle class, so in the nineteenth century, the American Civil War sounded it for the European working class" (MEGA^2 II/5, 13; MECW, vol. 35, 9; MEGA^2 III/10, 153; MECW, vol. 41, 3 ff.). He further characterized Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of September 22, 1866, as "globally ground breaking." Depriving the Confederate states of its labor pool for cotton production had now injected a revolutionary dimension to the conflict (MEGA^2 III/12, 186–187; MECW, vol. 41, 399 ff.; MEGA^2 III/12, 256–258; MECW, vol. 41, 419 ff.; MEGA^2 III/12, 256–258; MECW, vol. 42, 268). Engels, too, did not overlook the war's significance. Although he lamented

over the Union's poor military tactics (and admired the decisive actions of the Confederate generals), Engels hesitated to predict a victory for the Union. Only at the end of 1864 did Engels see sufficient evidence for a Union victory, and he further elaborated on the nature of this world-historical event. "A people's war of this kind," he wrote, points "the direction for the future of the whole of America for hundreds of years to come." With the shackle of slavery broken, the country "will acquire quite a different position in world history within the shortest possible time" (MEGA^2 III/13, 72; MECW, vol. 42, 37).

Marx concurred, declaring that "never has such a gigantic revolution occurred with such rapidity. It will have a highly beneficial influence on the whole world" (MEGA^2 III/13, 90; MECW, vol. 42, 48). With slavery abolished, Marx reasoned, the path was clear for the dominance of genuine waged work throughout the entire continent. American workers were now in the position to recognize the exploitative dimensions of wage labor, thereby setting in motion the mechanisms for acquiring class consciousness. "The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation," he averred in *Capital*, "which ran with the seven-league boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California" (MEGA^2 II/5, 240; MECW, vol. 35, 305). A decade later, he approvingly reiterated the consequences of a dominant wage system: "If the Anti-Slavery war has broken the chains of the black, it has on the other hand enslaved the white producers" (MEW vol. 34, 359; MECW, vol. 45, 344).

Yet the Union victory hardly ended racism. Reconstruction and the ensuing era of Jim-Crow laws deprived black citizens equal access to an agricultural livelihood, just as color lines segregated labor in workshops, factories, and mines. In some instances, white workers accepted lower wages rather than work with blacks (Foner 1974, 87). When African American workers moved to northern industrial centers during the Great Migration, employers deployed them as strikebreakers, thus setting the stage for antagonistic relationships (Roediger 2007, 177 ff.). Fearing competition and lower wages, Irish and German workers in the north also strove to exclude blacks from organized labor. In 1883, Frederick Douglass, the former slave and rights activist, exhorted union management to integrate: "The labor unions of the country should not throw away this colored element of strength … [and] weaken the bond of brotherhood between those on whom the burden and hardships of labor must fall." Despite decades of effort, interracial labor "foundered on the shoals of racial conflict" (Trotter 2019, 68–69). Although instances of cooperation between black and white workers exist, the overall picture is bleak. In the 1880s, the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, the country's largest unions, endorsed equality and created some mixed craft associations, but overall national leadership did little to prevent local associations from barring Blacks from their local affiliations. (Similar patterns of exclusion occurred with Mexican-American and Chinese-American laborers.) As late as 1902, W. E. B. Du Bois found 43 unions, including railroad brotherhoods, without a single black worker; 27 others had very few Blacks and furthermore barred black apprentices (Foner 1974, 74). In view of these significant impediments to organization, Marx and Engels' relative silence on the racial divide among workers is surprising. Philip Foner's judgment that Marx

considered "the issue of black-white relations a minor one" also applies to Engels, who did little in the decade after Marx's death to reorient his position (Foner 1977, 41; Nimtz 2003, 172–178).

Far more prominent for Marx and Engels than debilitating race relations was industrial growth. During the three decades after the Civil War, the United States tripled industrial production and gross national product. In small towns, factories grew by 159%; in cities, by 245%. In this period, America's productivity rose to stand among the world's leaders. Despite the influx of skilled workers from Europe, insufficient labor pools for expanding industrial sectors altered work opportunities. In short supply, labor became more expensive and redefined workers' political rights (Shefter 1986, 199–200, 204). While the business class banked on extensive mechanization of work as a means to mitigate labor costs, Marx and Engels believed that such industrial work would accelerate the systemic contradictions of capitalism and increasingly regarded the United States as a bellwether for such development. As Marx noted in 1878, "The most interesting field for the economist is now certainly to be found in the United States, and, above all, during the period of 1873 (since the crash in September) until 1878 – the period of chronic crisis. Transformations –which required *centuries* in England – were here realised *in a few years*" (MEW, vol. 34, 359; MECW, vol. 45, 344). The concentration of American capital, he continued in another letter, stemmed from "unprecedented rapid industrial development," whose tempo far outstripped English progress. Moreover, Marx noted, "the masses are quicker, and have greater political means in their hands" (MEW, vol. 34, 374 ff.; MECW, vol. 45, 357–358).

Friedrich Engels was no less impressed by the "colossal speed with which the concentration of capital is taking place in America" (MEW, vol. 35, 315; MECW, vol. 46, 251). In 1882, Engels dubbed Cornelius Vanderbilt, the railroad tycoon valued at 300 million dollars, the "king" of American capitalists, but "the number of American money barons is far greater" (MEW, vol. 19, 307). For Engels, such concentrated wealth ripened revolutionary conditions. The expropriation of land for railroads and mines, he wrote, raised the price of land, which only the well-off farmers could afford, thereby radicalizing the small-scale immigrant farmers in the West (MEW, vol. 34, 59; MECW. vol 45, 250ff.). He further saw far-reaching consequences in the pattern of American land settlement for other countries. "Mass production," he wrote to Karl Kautsky, "was yet only in its infancy, and really large-scale agriculture are threatening to all but suffocate us by the sheer volume of the means of subsistence produced" (MEW, vol. 35, 150 ff.; MECW, vol. 46, 57). With the cultivation of the American prairie through mechanized agriculture, Engels foresaw a new epoch. Demographic growth, technological progress, and concentrated capital, he argued, increasingly radicalized both agricultural and industrial sectors. In the fourth edition to the German-language version of the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels took stock of the world's political economy and underscored the reversed role of the United States in relation to Europe. Whereas America's raw materials once stabilized the European order, "how all of that has changed today!" Both the mass scale of agriculture and rapid industrial development will, he penned in 1882, shortly "put an end to the industrial monopoly of Western Europe" and, moreover,

"react in a revolutionary manner on America itself" (MEGA^2 I/31, 255; MECW, vol. 27, 54). No less important for Engels, such developments portended repercussions for the workers' movement in Europe, because America no longer acted as the safety valve for Europe. "The stream of emigration, which Europe sends to America annually, only exaggerates the consequences of the capitalist economy, so that a colossal crash will come in the long or short term" (MEW, vol. 19, 307).

Convinced of America's leading role to destabilize capitalism, Engels refined his analysis of global political economy. His correspondence with Florence Kelley-Wischnewetzky, the prominent social worker and the translator of Marx, highlights Engels' efforts to adjust to the current conditions. America, he wrote to her, is not in the position to inherit England's monopoly. Such advantageous conditions, which England enjoyed in the years 1848 to 1870, could not be produced anywhere, "and even in America the condition of the working class must gradually sink lower and lower." Instead, Engels emphasized a dynamic brought about by the competitive pressure of world markets:

> For if there are three countries (say England, America, and Germany) competing on comparatively equal terms for the control of world markets, there is no chance but chronic overproduction, one of the three being capable of supplying the whole quantity required. That is the reason why I am watching the development of the present crisis with greater interest than ever and why I believe it will mark an epoch in the mental and political history of the American and English working classes (MEW, vol. 36, 432 ff.; MECW, vol. 47, 396–397).

Not as an enthusiastic free trader but, rather, as a committed socialist, Engels promoted the unrestricted flow of goods in the Atlantic basin and throughout the world. The dovetailing of British, American, and European markets would, according to Engels' schema, raise the frequency of business cycles, exert new pressures on the international working class, and thereby accentuate more clearly the political goals of the proletariat. Simply put, free trade would stimulate a new revolutionary dynamic. In 1886, using a dubious zero-sum logic, he raised the prospect of economic collapse into a scenario of permanent crisis: "If one great monopolist industrial country produced a crisis every ten years, what will four such countries produce? Approximately a crisis in 10/4 years, that is to say, practically a crisis without end" (MEW, vol. 36, 438 ff.; MECW, vol. 47, 402). In 1893, he sketched this desideratum with greater care:

> …while England is fast losing her industrial monopoly, France and Germany are approaching the industrial level of England, and America bids fair to drive them all out of the world's market both for industrial and for agricultural produce. The introduction of an, at least relative, free-trade policy in America is sure to complete the ruin of England's industrial monopoly, and to destroy, at the same time, the industrial export trade of Germany and France; then the crisis must come, *tout ce qu'il y a de plus fin de siècle* (MEW, vol. 39, 37 ff.; MECW, vol. 50, 111).

In sum, Marx and Engels keenly followed American economic growth over three decades and assessed its impact on global capitalism and on the European core. But this macroeconomic perspective on industrial production came at a price. It

overshadowed a closer examination of America's political economy and its culture of work, thus hindering a more accurate assessment of political possibilities.

2 Assessing the US Labor Movement

On May 1, 1886, the Haymarket Riots in Chicago shook the country. What started as a rally to demand an 8-h working day turned into a tragic melee when an unknown participant threw a bomb at police officers, who had been engaged to disperse the crowd. The police shot one worker dead and injured many; gunfire from the crowd killed four policemen, four civilians, and wounded numerous others. The violence, along with the state's reaction of blaming and prosecuting anarchists on the thinnest of evidence, set a new political tone for the workers' movement. The workers' response to the riots and deaths was galvanic. Approximately 200,000 workers went on strike in Pittsburgh, New York, Louisville, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Baltimore, and other cities, supported by the Knights of Labor and, after December 1886, the American Federation of Labor (MEGA^2 I/31, 29 ff.; MECW, vol. 26, 399–405; cf. David 1963; Green 2006; Messer Kruse 2011). Membership to the Knights of Labor swelled to over 700,000, and the United Labor Party scored success in local city elections. For Engels, it was "completely unprecedented for a movement to achieve such electoral successes after an existence of barely eight months" (MEW, vol. 36, 579; MECW, vol. 47, 531–534; Licht 1995, 166–196). The American proletariat, he wrote in December 1886, "was moving, and no mistake … This appearance of the Americans upon the scene I consider one of the greatest events of the year" (MEW, vol. 36, 589; MECW, vol. 47, 540 ff.; MEW, vol. 36, 490; MECW, vol. 47, 452).

I only wished, sighed Engels, that "Marx could have lived to see it!" (MECW, vol. 47, 452) He viewed the events as a key developmental stage in historical materialism. On the fortunate soil of America, "where no feudal ruins block the path, where its history begins in the seventeenth century with already developed elements of modern bourgeois civil society, the working class has reached these stages in only ten months" (MECW, vol. 47, 452). With unprecedented speed, the "promised land" of the United States would spring over entire historical epochs, which had required generations in Europe. Engels' visit to America's Northeast in 1888 only confirmed his faith in the character of average workers to act in their own interest – even the lowest of social classes. After visiting a prison in Boston, he remarked that the "chaps, dressed as ordinary workmen, look you straight in the eye with none of the hang-dog look of the usual criminal in gaol—this is something you will see nowhere in Europe … I acquired a great respect for the Americans in that place" (MECW, vol. 48, 207).

American agitation also affected European politics. The mass strikes of this era undermined the bourgeois credo "that America stood *above* class antagonisms and struggles." But that "delusion has now broken down," Engels wrote in 1886. "The last Bourgeois Paradise on earth is fast changing into a Purgatory, and can only be prevented from becoming, like Europe, an Inferno by the go-ahead pace at which

the development of the newly fledged proletariat of America will take place" (MEW, vol. 36, 490–491; MECW, vol. 47, 452). In a letter to Friedrich Adolf Sorge, Engel's principal liaison in the United States, he claimed that recent events demystified the legend of a classless society:

> The absence up till now of a labour movement in England, and more especially in America, has been the great trump card of radical Republicans everywhere, notably in France. Now these chaps are utterly dumbfounded—Mr. Clemenceau in particular who, on 2 November, witnessed the collapse of all that his policy was based on. 'Just look at America', he never tired of saying, "that's a real republic for you—no poverty and no labour movement!" And it's the same with men of Progress and "democrats" in Germany and over here, where they are just experiencing an incipient movement of their own. What has completely stunned these people is the fact that the movement is so strongly accentuated as a labour movement, and that it has sprung up so suddenly and with such force (MEW, vol. 36, 580; MECW, vol. 47, 533).

America's nascent movement, argued Engels elsewhere, would also affect the conservative trade unions in Great Britain. Inspired by transatlantic developments, English workers would politicize themselves, adopt continental socialism, and unite themselves with a "common program of millions of workers of all countries, from Siberia to California" (MEGA^2 I/31, 257; MECW, vol. 27, 53–60). At the apex of his euphoria, he declared in 1887: "But I am absolutely convinced that things are now going ahead over there, and perhaps more rapidly than here" (MEW, vol. 36, 704; MECW, vol. 48, 103). Engels' high spirits were justified. Between 1885 and 1890, there was an average of 1000 strikes per annum; in the early 1890s, the number rose to 1300 (Licht 1995, 173). After 1893, however, more sobering trends set in. The workers' movement failed to follow Engels' prediction of further radicalization. Despite numerous mitigating factors in America's political economy, he never wavered from the belief that class conflict would sharpen and clarify the workers' movement in the United States.

Reconciling actual events with desired aims proved difficult, and Engels turned to well-known stereotypes of American politics to justify failed expectations. He emphasized, for example, the baleful influence of anarchists at the Haymarket Riots, which he characterized as "foolish." Engels similarly invoked a common lament about Anglo-American pragmatism, noting that the demonstrations for the 8-hour day remained mired in its "trade-union stage," when it was necessary for unions and workers to move beyond "high wages and short hours" and thereby develop a "mixed" political program (MEW, vol. 36, 489; MECW, vol. 47, 451). He also mocked the religious piety that pervaded American culture as well as the schismatic tendencies of its political culture: "it will be years before anything can be done to inhibit sectarianism in America" (MEW, vol. 36, 123; MECW, vol. 47, 114). The rival influence of Ferdinand Lassalle and the sway of Karl Heinzen, a transplanted radical democrat, he dismissed as vestigial factionalism that would soon dissipate (MEW, vol. 36, 215; MECW, vol. 47, 197ff.; MEW, vol. 39, 173; MECW, vol. 50, 235 ff.). Engels worried about the political divide between native and immigrant workers as well as the "theoretical ignorance" of "all young nations," but he waved aside these problems as transitory, stressing instead positive developments.

He thus characterized the "entry of the indigenous working masses into the movement" as one of the "great events of 1886," for it signaled a unifying process that might bring American labor into the fold of scientific socialism. Such assumptions are instructive. On the one hand, he did not exempt American praxis from broader theoretical axioms; on the other, he assigned European workers the role of tutors and theoretical guides, a stratagem bound to fail for its patronizing premise. The "Germans over there," he advised Sorge, "will be a step or two ahead of the latter" and thereby constitute the "nucleus" who "retain a theoretical grasp of the nature and progress of the movement." Using abstract metaphors in place of specific facts and trends, Engels hoped that assimilated German emigrants "will keep the process of fermentation going and, eventually, rise to the top again" (MEW, vol. 36, 478.; MECW, vol. 47, 441).

With these reservations, and based on his trip to America in 1888, Engels gradually conceded that American conditions did not align with his analytical forecasts. Although America had "never known feudalism and has from the outset grown up upon a bourgeois basis," he admitted that other old-world mentalities and practices did in fact affect American society. Such cultural legacies included common law, religious sectarianism, and an Anglo-Saxon contempt for theory. The widely embraced mindset of expediency and practicality, noted Engels, prevented "the people to recognize clearly their own social interests." Regrettably, he observed to Eduard Bernstein, American workers were still "trapped" within "a wholly bourgeois level of thinking" (MEW, vol. 36, 487; MECW, vol. 47, 449). "If America's energy and vitality were backed by Europe's theoretical clarity," wrote Engels in 1883 to Sorge in the United States, "you would get everything fixed up within ten years. But that is, after all, an historical impossibility" (MEW, vol. 36, 47; MECW, vol. 47, 44).

Through the 1880s, Engels believed that the movement could iron out such ideological wrinkles. The lack of theoretical knowledge was, he reasoned, a phenomenon of all young cultures. "True, the Anglo-Americans want to do things their *own* way with a total disregard for reason and science," he noted in 1886, "nor could one expect anything else, yet they are drawing closer and will end up coming all the way" (MEW, vol. 36, 47; MECW, vol. 47, 44). A year later, he endorsed the same viewpoint: "I am absolutely convinced that things are now going ahead over there, and perhaps more rapidly than here, despite the fact that, for the time being, the Americans will have to learn exclusively from practice, and relatively little from theory" (MEW, vol. 36, 304; MECW, vol. 48, 103–104). Consequently, he advised America's Socialist Labor Party that "there is no better way to theoretical clearness of comprehension than to learn by one's own mistakes—*durch Schaden klug warden*" (MEW, vol. 36, 589; MECW vol. 47, 541). In that spirit – and contradicting earlier advice – he added "our theory is a theory of evolution, not a dogma to be learnt by heart and to be repeated mechanically. The less it is drummed into the Americans from outside and the more thoroughly they test it – with Germans' assistance – by personal experience, the more deeply will it penetrate their flesh and blood" (MEW, vol. 36, 597; MECW, vol. 48, 8).

Engels, then, sought to splice together American pragmatism and European socialist theory, but his prescriptive glosses did not always ring persuasive. While supporting the Socialist Labor Party as the best answer for workers, he recognized that it consisted exclusively of German immigrants. "If it came from a foreign stock," he asserted, "it came, at the same time, armed with the experience earned during long years of class-struggle in Europe, and with an insight into the general conditions of working-class emancipation, far superior to that hitherto gained by American workingmen." It's fortunate for the American workers, he continued, "who are thus enabled to appropriate, and to take advantage of, the intellectual and moral fruits of the forty years' struggle of their European classmates, and thus to hasten on the time of their own victory" (MEGA^2 I/31, 46; MECW, vol. 26, 440). But that form of paternalism cut against the attitude of American workers who did not wish to be schooled on labor politics, which is why Engels also remarked that socialists "will have to doff every remnant of foreign garb. They will have to become out and out American" (Kammen 1993, 29). Addressing workers' bourgeois attitudes, Engels argued, "it is precisely his opposition to a mother country still garbed in feudalism that leads the American working man to suppose the traditional bourgeois economic system he has inherited to be by its nature something immutably superior and progressive, a *non plus ultra*" (MEW, vol. 38, 560; MECW, vol. 50, 74). References to opportunity and land ownership, however, were more convincing "special American circumstances." As Engels noted in 1851, both "the ease with which the surplus population can drain off into the country" and the "ever more rapid, increase in the country's prosperity" caused workers "to regard bourgeois conditions as the beau ideal" (MECW, vol. 38, 406). This insight remained undeveloped.

Despite poverty and immiseration – 40% of American workers in the 1880s lived in poverty – American workers remained unreceptive to socialism (Montgomery 1976, 117). Engels turned to life-cycle analogies to compare American infancy and youth with European maturity, praising the former as preeminent "when it comes to practice and still in swaddling clothes as regards theory," or that America is a '"youthful'" country which still can't quite extricate itself from the hobbledehoy stage" (MEW, vol. 36, 689; MECW, vol. 48, 91; MEW, vol. 38, 560; MECW, vol. 50, 74). With metaphors of immaturity, Engels justified the dilatory tempo of America's transition from republican democracy to socialism without addressing whether his theoretical premises warranted equal scrutiny.

But the reasons for American resistance to socialist agitation ran deeper, and four stand out. First and foremost, political and economic struggle remained discrete domains of action, thereby confounding the praxis of European socialists, who saw state power as a central enemy. Although American factory workers, craftsmen, and construction workers exhibited a pronounced militancy in the 1860s, with which they asserted their interests through strikes, they perceived employers as their opponents, not the state. Whereas state governments and its military and police were long-established adversaries for European workers, American laborers fundamentally separated economic grievances from political revolution. Despite the alarmist images of political anarchy from the sensational press, the impressive strike waves

between 1876 and 1900 remained mostly unpolitical. For most strikers, the work stoppages turned on the issues of a living wage, unjustified dismissals, and better work conditions. Approximately 60% of all strikes from this period centered on the issue of wages, and a third of them were carried out without a union (Licht 1995, 173–175). Despite organizational deficiencies, many strikes succeeded, because their communities – including the bourgeoisie – stood behind them. Manufacturing and mining communities closed ranks against such "big bosses" as Jay Gould or Andrew Carnegie. Like the Granger Movement of western farmers, workers and local communities directed their wrath at the monopolies of banks, railroads, mines, and meatpacking companies, demanding that the government regulate them (Cronon 1992, 362–364). For this reason, the aspiration of European socialists to move strikes beyond pragmatic issues of wages and work conditions never took firm root. For a new era of political actions against the democratic state, Engels' hopes did not reflect American conditions or behavior.

America's republicanism and its political credo of democratic civic rights marked the second prominent reason for socialism's weak reception. In myth and in reality, the franchise loomed large in the American political imagination. The country's decentralized, federated political system conferred measurable political influence on ordinary white men. (Of course, Jim Crow laws undercut the black franchise, just as nineteenth-century civil society excluded women from formal political participation.) Since the Jacksonian era, unpropertied workers voted and consequently wielded influence in municipal, local, county, and state elections. Unions and workers' associations developed political networks in cities and towns – the so-called political machines – and were capable of placing their candidates up for election as mayors, city councilors, sheriffs, police chiefs, and local judges. Despite electoral fraud, ordinary Americans saw their vote count. At the national level, diverse social classes formed the Democratic and Republican parties. These complex umbrella organizations mobilized voters into large camps for national and state elections, a form of political mobilization that undercut specific labor-oriented issues. To be sure, anarchists, syndicalists, socialists, and left-wing populists exerted influence on the workers' movement. For example, Samuel Gompers, the head of the AFL, was influenced by Marxism, just as some unions of unskilled labor had a "strong element of syndicalism," but long-term ideological impact was minimal (Shefter 1986, 225; Foner 1984, 16). Rather than look to radical political change or even revolution, workers believed that republican democracy could resolve the monopolistic tendencies of big business. For workers, the US constitution and its mixed-powers political structure was more a bulwark of legal protection than a problem. Notwithstanding notable exceptions, neither the rudimentary state bureaucracies nor their police forces emerged as self-evident opponents of organized labor. On the contrary, in such cities as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Chicago, white working-class ethnic communities exerted influence and power through municipal administrations and police forces. In this regard, Marx and Engels misjudged the deep-seated regard among workers for democratic republicanism. Just as many European socialist movements had moved beyond the political radicalism of 1848, so too did Engels and Marx expect that America's infatuation with bourgeois

civic culture would erode when confronted with the material inequities of industrial capitalism. Their premise that waged labor necessarily produced an antagonistic class consciousness hindered a sharper analysis of American class formation (Foner 1984, 2).

The complexities of class identity constitute the third factor. The clear delineations of class, caste, and social privilege that ostensibly existed in European society did not crystallize in nineteenth-century America. The identities of employee and employer were not the fixed categories of continental Europe or Britain. In 1867, Edwin L. Godwin, the progressive editor of the *Nation*, underscored the blurred distinction between worker and capitalist:

> The social line between the laborer and the capitalist is here very faintly drawn. Most successful employers of labor have begun by being laborers themselves; most laborers hope, and may reasonably hope, to become employers. Moreover, there are … few barriers of habits, manners, or tradition between the artisan and those for whom he works, so that he does not consider himself the member of an 'order'… Strikes, therefore, are in the United States more a matter of business, and less a matter of sentiment, than in Europe (Godkin 1867, 178).

Contributing to this outlook among ordinary Americans was their preindustrial embrace of artisanal autonomy, which included property ownership. The ideal type of the producer yeoman, so championed by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, endured well into the nineteenth century. The high regard for economic independence and the corresponding disdain for servile waged labor struck deep roots in the "producer ideology" of the early republic when farmers, craftsmen, and other producers considered themselves the backbone of the nation. Whig ideology celebrated the "yeoman producer" as the core independent political citizenry necessary for a republic. It touted the independent craftsmen as the predominant bearers of the republic's democratic values and individual freedoms. Independent artisans, craftsmen, and farmers took pride in their status as owners and producers, thus viewing waged labor as a loss in autonomy and status. Although wage labor dominated the American economy after the Civil War, the respect for the producer ideology endured, especially when demographic mobility permitted workers to become proprietors. The republican form of rights-bearing citizenship therefore saw no contradiction in linking property and equality (Cotlar 2011). In sum, democratic radicalism stamped the workers' worldview. This political attitude, which persisted well into the twentieth century, undercut the expansion of the Socialist Party.

Finally, and not least, the long-enduring racist legacy of slavery constituted yet another critical difference. Prior to the Civil War in the Confederate states, as well as those in the north, white workers assumed greater commonality with employers than with black workers. After the Civil War, workers' organizations largely failed to integrate black workers because of this ingrained bigotry. Believing that black members would bring down trade-union wages, many craft associations used African American's lack of formal craft credentials as a pretext to exclude black workers. Such prejudice was all the more strengthened with the basic division of workers' organizations. In the 1870s and 1880s, closed shops of skilled workers (mostly of white European origin) identified themselves as trade unions, thus

distinguishing themselves from the more inclusive labor unions, the open associations of unskilled laborers and factory workers. In 1886, Samuel Gompers founded the American Federation of Labor (AFL), an umbrella organization that effectively represented the economic interests of craftsmen. In doing so, the AFL bracketed out both political issues and unskilled workers. The move neutralized the revolutionary potential of organized labor and segregated it. In similar fashion, ethnic and religious identities cut against the grain of class consciousness and undermined overarching solidarity among workers. If the mass industrial unions absorbed the new waves of unskilled and semiskilled immigrants, the closed shops of skilled trades did not (Olssen 1988, 422). Divisions among European workers – e.g., Catholic/Protestant and northern/southern – strengthened fissures in working-class culture; and in the western territories, white settlers only saw Mexican and Chinese laborers as constituencies to exclude and exploit (Cf. Montgomery 1987; idem 1993; Livesay 1978; Harris 1982; Weir 1996; Gordon 2001). The intersection of race, class, and ethnic loyalty undermined worker solidarity. Moreover, racism, nativism, and ethnic hostility further poisoned cross-cultural alliances, thus hindering a consciousness of collective interests (Foner 1984 66).

Marx and Engels were not oblivious to America's segmented workers' movement and engaged the issue with Sorge in the 1870s. They had encountered English bigotry toward Irish workers in the British labor movement, leading Marx to identify the antagonism as "the secret of the impotence of the English working class" (Foner 1977, 41). With the reconstitution of the "International Workingmen's Association," or the First International (1865–1876), they regarded the recruitment of skilled workers from the northern states as strategically more essential than introducing a broad reform program of all American socialists, whose platforms included equal rights for women and African Americans. Convinced of the accuracy and correctness of their "scientific socialism," Marx and Sorge rejected the big-tent principle that American radicals espoused, even though many elements of Marx's program accommodated the radicals' platform. At its Hague conference in 1872, the IWA leadership not only excluded Bakunin's anarchists but also distanced itself from Section 12, the so-called Yankee International. In this way, Sorge, as General Secretary of the First International, reinforced the polarizing divisions of the workers' movement (Messer-Kruse 2000, 157–186).[1] After Marx's death in 1883, Engels kept to this course of action, a decision that squandered political opportunities into the next decade.

Shortly before his death in 1895, Engels sought to comfort Friedrich Sorge, his important emissary in New Jersey, about socialism's decline in the United States. By wrapping the problem in cultural paradox and emphasizing cultural lags in fashion design, Engels strained to make a persuasive argument:

> I have for some time been aware of the temporary decline of the movement in America and it is not the German socialists who will stem it. Though America is the *youngest*, it is also

[1] For a positive assessment of Marx's position on the role of race in the United States, see Nimtz 2003, 227 ff.

> the oldest country in the world. In the same way as you have, over there, the most antiquated furniture designs alongside your own vernacular ones or, in Boston, cabs such as I last saw in London in 1838 and, in the mountains, seventeenth-century stage coaches, alongside Pullman cars, so too you continue to sport all the old mental trappings which Europe has already discarded. Everything outmoded here may persist in America for another generation or two.

He also attributed political stagnancy yet again to America's exceptional size and accelerated development, themes that he and Marx had reiterated frequently since the 1840s:

> it may also be attributed to the dual nature of America's development, still engaged as it is on the one hand in the *primary* task of reclaiming the vast area of untamed country, while being already compelled on the other to compete for first place in industrial production. Hence the ups and downs of the movement, according to which point of view takes precedence in the average person's mind—that of the urban working man or that of the peasant engaged in reclamation. In a couple of years' time, all this will change and then we shall witness a great step forward.

Even less convincing was his recourse to racial attributes:

> The evolution of the Anglo-Saxon race with its ancient Teutonic freedom happens to be quite exceptionally slow, pursuing as it does a zig-zag course (small zig-zags in England, colossal ones on your side of the Atlantic) and tacking against the wind, but making headway nonetheless (MEW, vol. 39, 385 ff.; MECW, vol. 50, 422).

In other letters, he also drew on general nostrums of scientific socialism to temporize about American peculiarities: "It is the revolutionising of all time-honoured conditions by the *growth* of industry which likewise revolutionises men's minds" (MEW, vol. 38, 560; MECW, vol. 50, 74–75). Engels furthermore resorted to indefinite moments in the future when socialism would avenge itself: "*When* the time comes over there, things will move with tremendous speed and dynamism, but that may not be for some while yet. Miracles never happen" (MEW, vol. 38, 182; MECW, vol. 49, 265).

With these desultory impressions and digressions, Engels tacitly acknowledged that his essentialist definition for class conflict failed to provide an accurate prognosis. Economic facts were not always stronger than politics. Despite his considerable attention to cultural determinants, Engels' persistent belief in a class-consciousness derived from the economic exploitation of industrial labor failed to explain the vagaries of the American labor movement. Despite Engel's prodigious talents for analyzing empirical data, and despite his predilection for pragmatic political action, a young country had evaded his analytical grasp.

Engels was not alone in this failure, and for over a century, economists and historians have debated why American workers rejected socialist precepts. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the American frontier forged values of democratic egalitarianism and rugged individualism. Werner Sombart reframed those arguments in 1906 to emphasize America's two-party system, its high standard of living, and the emphasis on individual achievement as retardants to socialism. Such iterations of American exceptionalism held sway during the Cold War Era and continues to have its adherents (Lipset and Marks 2000). More recent scholarship has

tempered the triumphalism of consensus liberalism by focusing on social groups – women, Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, etc. – who were excluded from the privileges of white labor. How unions and parties constructed working-class culture as white and male, thereby effacing racial and ethnic elements of working-class identity, partially explains why a purely economic definition of class formation is insufficient (Roediger 2007; Trotter 2019). But whether such elements constitute a genuine American exceptionalism is a pressing question that calls for comparison. Set in broader frameworks, America's working-class entanglement with race, ethnicity, religion, and political customs becomes far less unique and singular. Both within and outside Europe, such cultural factors also shaped class attitudes and behavior, and such comparative analysis remains a desideratum (Olssen 1988, 417ff.; Foner 1984 76; Wilentz 1984; Kammen 1993; Chakrabarty 2000). Hence, while historical hindsight affords a clear perspective on the problems of Engels' essentialist understanding of industrial class conflict, one should view Engels' blind spot with due regard. Even in the twenty-first century, modeling class behavior continues to confound the social sciences.

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