

**“In Our Present Society: Victor Berger,
Sewer Socialism, and the Continuous
Impact of American Socialism”**

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Jacob B. Karp

Mentor: Professor Jeffrey Freedman, History

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Introduction:

While it is often asserted that socialism has never taken hold in the United States, there was at least one city in America where there was, for a brief time, a successful socialist political party. Led by Victor Berger and Emil Seidel, the Social-Democratic party of Milwaukee (SDPW) enjoyed success at the municipal level in the form of aldermen and mayors, and at the national level even won a seat in the United States Congress. Given this success, it is fair to ask a few questions. The first is why did this particular municipal party fare far better than the nationwide Socialist Party of America (SPA)? Although it is true that in the presidential election of 1912 the Eugene Debs received 6 percent, this was by far the best the Socialist party ever did, whereas in Milwaukee, Victor Berger would be elected to congress in 1922, and Milwaukee would elect a plethora of municipal officials. Secondly, what exactly did the term ‘socialism’ mean to Berger and the people of Milwaukee? It is clear that this particular brand of socialism was at odds with the dominant theory as it was derogatorily labeled “sewer socialism” by Morris Hillquit in 1932. Furthermore, Berger was often at odds with the left-wing members of the Socialist Party of America, including Eugene Debs and J.A. Wayland, a battle that often spilled over into the largest socialist paper at the time, the *Appeal to Reason*. Even after Berger and his wing officially joined the SPA, much like the fractures that lurked just below the surface of the supposedly united German SPD, there remained deep theoretical differences within the national party, with Berger’s faction firmly on the moderate side. Finally, in order to understand why Berger succeeded where others failed, it is also important to ask who the people living in Milwaukee were, where they came from, and what made them more inclined than the rest of the country to vote for socialist candidates. It is clear that there were three main factors that enabled the SDPW to enjoy so much success. First is the particular brand of socialism that the party, and specifically Victor Berger, preached, second the practical methods that they used to achieve their

goals, and third the unique character of the citizens of Milwaukee. Through examining these three factors, it will become clear why Berger and the SDPW were able to succeed while Debs and the SPA failed. Additionally, through the investigation of the policies put forth by Berger under the aegis of socialism, it will become apparent that socialism, at least in some form, continues to exist in the politics of the United States to this very day. In doing so, the idea presented in works such as Weinstein's, *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. And Lipset's *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, that the socialist movement in America fizzled out in the early 1900's, is incorrect. Rather, when Victor Berger's unique form of socialism is taken seriously, it becomes clear that his form of socialism has been lurking in American politics, sometimes stronger in influence and sometimes weaker, since he first advocated for it in the first decade of the 20th century.

The Landscape of Milwaukee

Like many antebellum frontier cities, Milwaukee¹ began to grow in the mid to late 19th century, as immigration caused a major shift in American demographics. Its location was ideal for shipping on the Great Lakes, as the Milwaukee River and bay are one of the "few safe havens for ships on the smooth western coast of Lake Michigan."² Although the main business of Milwaukee in the early days was land speculation, this unpredictable business gave way to actual settlers who were invested in creating a thriving community. The cheap land, opportunity for employment, and relative accessibility may Milwaukee a prime target for immigrants, and by the 1850s, they began to arrive in waves. The first major wave of Immigrants was Irish, poor, and lower class who had begun to see fleeing Ireland for America as an "accepted fact of life" due to

¹ In early documents concerning the city, Milwaukee is often spelled "Milwauky." For the purposes of this paper, the modern spelling will be used, even anachronistically. See Kathleen N. Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976) pg. 12. The following section quotes heavily from

² Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee*. The following section quotes heavily from this work and is the source for quotations unless otherwise stated.

the poor economic and social conditions in Ireland. They, along with the British and Scottish immigrants who emigrated around the same time, came to America for the potential to improve their economic position in the land of opportunity. This shared goal amongst these groups makes sense, as the hardships faced by the lower classes in the United Kingdom were primarily driven by a shortage of land, a problem that these immigrants knew America did not have. The next group of immigrants, however, would come for more variable reasons, and leave a far greater mark on the city. Germans³ had become moving to Milwaukee as early as 1835, with many of the earliest immigrant having left behind jobs as artisans and skilled workers for the opportunities they perceived in America. In contrast, the first large wave of German immigrants, who came in the early 1840's, were poorer and looking to escape economic crisis in Europe. They settled in Milwaukee at the encouragement of the Germans who were already there, and due to the ease with which they could travel to this city of opportunity. As the decade progresses, it became clear that Germans were leaving Germany for a variety of reasons, other than economic hardships. These reasons included a "spirit of adventure," a "wish to reunite with relatives," and "to avoid military service." Finally, and most key to the history of socialism in Milwaukee, a group of immigrants began to arrive in Milwaukee for political reasons. After the 1848 Revolutions, discontented liberals and radicals began to make their way across the ocean and settled in Milwaukee. As a final note on Milwaukee's shifting demographics, it must be mentioned that by 1860 there were only ninety-two African Americans living in Milwaukee in 1860, and it did not grow in a major way until the Great Migration in the 1920's and beyond. This lack of diversity greatly aided the popularity of socialist leaders who held highly racist views, such as Victor Berger, who no doubt would have struggled to capture the "Black vote"

³ "Germany" as the modern state did not actually yet exist, and the term here refers to a few dozen loosely allied, but greatly varying, states.

had there been any of it to capture. In addition, the lack of African Americans aided the Socialist cause in a more roundabout way – unlike many Southern politicians who often blamed their cities’ woes on the Black population, the leaders in Milwaukee could not make use of this convenient scapegoat, and thus were forced to look in a different direction when times were hard. The combination of these radicals and socialists, and the strong social bonds created by the sheer number of German immigrants, were key to establishing a sturdy base for the eventual creation of the SPDW.

Another key ingredient for Milwaukee’s socialist future was the type of labor these new German immigrants were to be involved in. The city of Milwaukee would quickly grow from a small frontier town to a booming industrial city, whose port would be put to use shipping products across the great lakes to lucrative markets. By the turn of the century, Milwaukee, by then known as the “Machine Shop of the World,” was involved in a variety of industrial activities, including meatpacking, printing, tanneries, the manufacturing of heavy farming equipment, and, most famously, the production of beer. The jobs were a mixture of unskilled and low-skilled labor, and while there was certainly an upper-class of land and capital owning German immigrants, the majority certainly fell into what would be considered the “proletariat” in Marxist thought. In other words, they were perfect candidates for unionization, and unionize they did. The importance of what kind of labor the German immigrants did is only slightly more important to the eventual strength of the socialist movement in Milwaukee as was how these immigrants got their jobs. For the most part, “many Germans were employed by fellow countrymen,” which led to a sense of solidarity and strengthened the bonds between owner and worker. Furthermore, the existence of Germans at every level in city’s economic structure meant that the Germans were in a unique position to have a complete exclusive community within the greater Milwaukee body politic. This was key to the eventual rise of the SDPW, as they were a

party that could be supported by appealing to a distinct and powerful set of likeminded individuals and the working class, who were all bound by communal ties instead of the standard class divides.

Finally, the fact that this group of immigrants was not just large and relatively homogenous, but also specifically German, is important to the story. After the German unification in 1871, the Reichstag was established, and its political parties differed greatly from the American system. The first significant difference is that number of parties that could realistically capture seats in the German parliamentary body, as opposed to in America. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, when the American labor movement was picking up steam, the familiar two-party system was already entrenched in American politics.⁴ There are a wide variety of factors that cause third-party candidates to have little chance in Federal elections. First, the electoral college “first-past-the-post” system of assigning votes in Presidential elections means that voters are dissuaded from voting for a third-party candidate or party that is unlikely to carry a majority of the votes in any given election which discourages small parties from running candidates in the first place. While it may be tempting to claim that this “quirk” of the American election system is to blame for the failure of socialist parties to get off the ground, it is not the case, as many European countries with thriving socialist parties, that today have proportional voting systems, were once also “single-member plurality” systems, like America, in the early 1900s.⁵ Germany was one of those countries and, as will be discussed later in the paper, it had a thriving political left wing. In addition, it might be tempting to assume that Germany’s left wing was similar to other European labor parties who compromised on some of their values in order to unite with some of the progressive parties and gain power. However, the German socialist parties

⁴ Seymour M. Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000). Pg 43

⁵ *Ibid.* 46

were notorious for refusing to compromise. Therefore, the difference in political structure between Germany and America cannot account for the failure of socialism in America at large, and its success in Milwaukee.⁶ What is important about the “German-ness” of Milwaukee is how Germans related to their political parties. Unlike in America, where the extent of one’s involvement in a political party usually began and ended with the vote, and at most, aside from the super wealthy, extended to a few gatherings, in Germany political parties functioned not only as political bodies, but also as social clubs for citizens. The parties would hold picnics, meetings, unions, and clubs for its members. This was largely due to the fact that the Reichstag had very limited power, as they did not real say in the chancellorship, and as a result political parties were as much, if not more, places for likeminded individuals to fraternize then they were political parties. This then is the first key distinction between Milwaukee’s socialist party and any broader socialist party at the national level. At its root, the Milwaukee party was distinctly German, with opportunities for involvement from the constituency and a culture of engagement with the political party. Politics would become embedded into this new “German Athens,”⁷ and the nature of this political party would also be greatly influenced by the fact that it was specifically Germans, including some radicals who had fled after the 1848 revolutions, who constituted the majority in Milwaukee.

German Socialism and the Revisionist Controversy

It is here where a shift in focus from America, specifically Milwaukee, to a discussion of the very messy world of German socialism, or social democracy, is necessary. From its inception, the very definition of “social democracy” and what it entailed was highly contentious.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee*, 172.

Its introduction to German society was marked by bitter disagreements between the followers of Ferdinand Lasalle - and after his death Jean Baptist Schweitzer - who helped form the first working class party in Germany the *Allgemeiner deutscher Arbeiterverein* (ADAV), and the followers of August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht who formed the *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei* (SDAP). Only after German unification and the ensuing crackdown on socialists did these two parties reconcile and combine into the *Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands* (SADP). Representatives from the two parties met in Gotha and passed what became known as the “Gotha Program.” Although this new program contained a mix of ADAV and SDAP ideas, the former leaders of the SDAP held the upper hand within the party. When the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD) was established in 1890 after the ban on socialism was finally lifted, it was clearly the successor to the more radical part of the SADP, whose members had come from the ranks of the SDAP. The newly founded SPD, however, would not escape the infighting of its predecessors, and it would play host to one of the most important debates about the very nature of socialism and Marx’s writings. Eduard Bernstein, who had been forced to flee Germany during the anti- socialist years, would return from his exile with a radical new understanding of socialism, and launch direct attacks on some of Marx’s core arguments. Bernstein’s claims would be met with fierce opposition, first by his longtime friend Karl Kautsky, and later by Rosa Luxemburg, who would establish herself as a leader of the radical wing of the SPD. These debates would become known as the “revisionist controversy.” In short, the SPD would become the battleground for three distinct factions of the German left, each with its own distinct meaning behind the term “socialism.” As these distinctions would play out on the American stage, when factions formed amongst the SPA, it is important to understand each of these three wings of the SPD, and the bitter disagreement that has become known to history as the “revisionist controversy.”

On the left most edge of the SPD were the most radical adherents to Marx's call for a rebellion of the proletariat. Rosa Luxemburg, who would lead, and be killed in, the doomed "Spartacus Rebellion" led by *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD). Luxemburg was vehemently anti-union and anti-compromise.⁸ She took a hardline approach to her belief in Marxist ideology and refused to see success as anything less than the complete destruction of the Capitalist class, and the forcible expropriation of capital to the proletariat. The leader of the mainstream faction of Marxist thought was Karl Kautsky, who had helped edit Marx's "Theory of Surplus Value," and promoted a brand of thought called "Orthodox Marxism." This theory was much more in line with Marx's claim that revolution was bound to happen as the natural reaction by the proletariat to the inherent injustices created by capitalism. As such, Kautsky certainly believed a revolution was coming, but unlike Luxemburg he did not support the Spartacus Rebellion. Still, Kautsky's theories placed him firmly and unambiguously in Marxist waters. Finally, the right wing of the SPD was led by Eduard Bernstein, who in 1899 published a book titled "Evolutionary Socialism," which kicked off the entire controversy. In the book, he launched numerous theoretical attacks on the facts that underpinned much of Marx's thoughts. These attacks included claims that the proletariat was actually increasing its wealth, meaning wealth was not becoming more and more consolidated by the Capitalists, and pointed out that unlike Marx believed, economic catastrophes were both not cyclical in nature, and not happening at an increased rate.⁹ If Bernstein's outright rejection of core Marxist thought did not alert people to the true extent of his revisions, then his prescriptions certainly would have. In perhaps his most famous line, Bernstein revealed that he was more interested in the movement of socialism and the policies that could aid the worker immediately than he was in "what is usually called 'the

⁸ See Rosa Luxemburg, (ed. Howard, Dick), *Against Revisionism and Opportunism*, Monthly Review Press, 1971 pp 72-76. "The activity of the trade unions is limited essentially to...efforts at regulating capitalist exploitation within the market relations." Pg. 74.

⁹ Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1961) pp. 48,49,60,73,80

final aim of socialism”¹⁰. It is this sentence that truly reveals just how far Bernstein had broken from Marx. Bernstein saw the point of socialism not as a final violent class conflict that would inevitably happen, but as a way to incrementally improve the lives of the working class through democracy and policy change. This bombshell of a sentence from Bernstein engendered fierce pushback from Kautsky, and more vehemently from Luxemburg.

Beginning in 1898, Luxemburg launched a series of attacks on Bernstein and his theories. While she critiqued many of his arguments on both a theoretical and factual level,¹¹ this alone would not have been enough to cause a full blown “controversy,” as the Left had long held theoretical debates without imploding. What made this debate different was Luxemburg’s claims that when Bernstein chose to abandon the theory of capitalist breakdown, he had removed “the cornerstone of scientific socialism” and “must also reject the whole socialist doctrine.” In case there was any confusion about what Luxemburg was trying to say, she concluded her work with a line that could not be misunderstood. She declared that Bernstein should “appear formally as what he is: a petty-bourgeois democratic progressive.”¹² It is here that Luxemburg hammers on a question that would echo across the sea in America. What counts as socialism and “true Marxism,” and what is simply progressive politics wrapped in the language of Marx? After all, Bernstein did try and insist that he was carrying on Marx’s legacy!¹³ It is this basic question that would tear apart the SPA, and it is the answer to this question that will explain why, or if, “socialism” was more successful in Milwaukee than in America writ large.

¹⁰ Ibid xxix.

¹¹ See Luxemburg, *Against Revisionism*. 74,77,100

¹² Ibid

¹³See Eduard Bernstein, “Karl Marx and Social Reform,” Speech to the London Fabian Society, January 1897. Bernstein argues, however unconvincingly, that like Marx, like himself, was more of an “evolutionary than a revolutionary.” The author of this paper is unconvinced.

Socialism in Turn of the 20th Century United States

Before expanding on the problem of defining socialism, it is time to hop back across the pond and investigate the particulars of Socialism in America at the beginning of the 19th century. There is perhaps no more appropriate place to begin this survey than with the most important socialist in American history, Eugene V. Debs. The Indiana native's rise from railcar paint-scraper to socialist hero was as unlikely as it was remarkable. Born to French immigrants who ran owned a small market and mill, Debs left school at fourteen to work on railcars. In doing so, he joined a slew of young men with big dreams who saw the locomotive industry as a way to move up in the world, dreaming of being able to "step into a Master Mechanics job in charge of all the engine men."¹⁴ It was in this capacity that Debs would join the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen (BLF), an early union that functioned more as a fraternity than an agitative labor organization. It is here that we get some of Debs' earliest thoughts on the relationship between labor and the corporations they served. Writing in the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, Debs proclaimed that "We feel ourselves duty bound.... to give to railway corporations... men who will be in direct interest of their employers."¹⁵ In return for this dedication, Debs expected the railway corporations to say, "Well done my good and faithful servants,"¹⁶ and treat their employees with respect. It is clear that Debs is still a long way off from the labor agitator and socialist he would become, as his overall message in his early days at the BLF is one of subservience to the corporations and harmony between the firemen and their bosses.¹⁷ Even after an 1877 strike broke out, and was broken, Debs remained aligned with the conservative tendencies of the brotherhood, and it would take a decade more of strikes, more populist

¹⁴ R.E. Boyer to Theodore Debs, 21 Oct. 1926, ISU, quoted in Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen Socialist* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 19.

¹⁵ Eugene Debs, *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, 3 (Jan. 1879), 17-18

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen Socialist*, 30-31

agitation from the Knights of Labor, and bitter warring withing the BLF for Debs to final leave and set out on a venture that but signify and hasten his slide to the left, the 1893 founding of the American Railway Union (ARU).¹⁸

The ARU started strong, with a successful strike against the Great Northern Railway in 1894. However, when Debs and the Union became involved in the Pullman Strike of 1894, they were thoroughly defeated by a combination of the powerful Capitalists and the Federal Government, who used troops to help crush the strike. During the strike Debs was arrested on charges of obstructing railcars carrying the mail and was sentenced to six months in jail. It is tempting to say that is here that Debs declared himself a socialist, and indeed in later writings about his life he would claim that it is while he was in jail and being sent socialist writings from around the world that he would become a socialist. In truth, it was not until the failures of William Jennings Bryant's populist party that would lead Debs to declare, in 1897, "The issue is socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity."¹⁹ However, as Debs himself is the one who claims his shift in thinking occurred while in jail, it is important to investigate what caused this shift. Writing for the *New York Comrade* in April 1902, and later republished in a 1908 edition of the *Appeal to Reason*, Debs laid out his views in a seminal article titled "How I became a Socialist." While he spends much of the article chronicling his path to the left, near the end he lays out the figures who had the most influence on his political thought, stating:

"The writings of Bellamy and Blatchford early appealed to me... but the writings of Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped, not merely his

¹⁸ Ibid. 116-118

¹⁹ *Railway Times*, 1 Jan. 1897, "Debs Hails Socialism", quoted in in Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen Socialist*, 161-162

argument, but also caught the spirit of his socialist utterance—and I thank him and all who helped me out of darkness into light.”²⁰

It is here where Debs not only declares his allegiance to socialism, but also what brand of Marxism he supports. It is Kautsky’s “Orthodox Marxism,” what in Germany became the centrist faction of the SPD, that Debs claimed to be an adherent of. However, this is not the only notable paragraph in the essay, as in the final lines, Debs recalls that it was an American socialist leader who visited him in jail and “delivered the first impassioned message of Socialism I had ever heard—the very first to set the “wires humming in my system.”²¹ This socialist leader was the none other than the pride of Milwaukee himself, Victor Berger.

Victor Berger was born to a middle-class family in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1860. He immigrated to America at the age of 18 and, after trying the American West, he settled, like many of his compatriots, in Milwaukee. There he taught high school history and German, before turning to journalism and politics in the 1890s.²² Unsurprisingly, given his background and choice of home, Berger was a socialist, and he soon became a leading figure in both the Milwaukee and American socialist parties. He became the leader of the right-wing faction within the socialist parties, and if Debs considered Kautsky’s revolutionary socialism to be the goal of the party, Berger’s vision was much more closely aligned with Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism. In fact, he uses the exact phrase “evolutionary socialism” to describe his beliefs! Responding to a variety of attacks lobbed at him by the left-wing of the American socialist movement, Bernstein engages in a biting critique of his critics. He explicitly states, “the

²⁰ Eugene V. Debs, “How I became a Socialist,” *Debs, His Life Writings and Speeches*, 1908, “The Appeal to Reason,” Girard, Kansas.

²¹ Ibid

²² Roderich Nash, Victor L. Berger: Making Marx Respectable, *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Summer, 1964, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Summer, 1964), pp. 301-308

evolutionary view” and “because we are evolutionary Socialists...”²³ He envisioned a socialist “revolution” that would slowly progress in stages, in a sort of bottom-up approach. Writing early on in his political career, he carefully laid out his goal, and his proposed way to achieve this goal:

“To accomplish this, we want to make use of our political liberty and take possession of public powers. And while this process is going on we also want to lighten the burdens on the shoulders of the wage workers and producers in general by constantly agitating, enacting, and enforcing laws in their favor, to strengthen their power of resistance in the great struggle.”²⁴

In Berger’s mind, it is not a violent revolution that will bring about socialism, rather it is the political might of an organized party that will bring capitalism to heel.

Unsurprisingly, much like Bernstein’s revisions, Berger’s ideas were met with stiff resistance from the leaders of left-wing of the party, with the fiercest opposition coming from Daniel De Leon, the avowed Marxist leader of the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) in the United States, and, at times, from Eugene V. Debs. Perhaps the best encapsulation of this debate can be found in the controversial establishment of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as a challenge to the dominant, Samuel Gompers led, American Federation of Labor (AFL). The philosophy of these unions could not have been more different. The AFL was a federation of craft unions they believed in working within the established economic (capitalistic) and political (democratic) systems to improve its members lives. The IWW was a union open to all, with the

²³ Victor Berger, “No Impossibilism for Us,” *The Vanguard*, 1906.

²⁴ Victor Berger, “American Socialism,” *Social Democratic Herald*, 1898

revolutionary goal of overthrowing the capitalist system. The IWW, which was backed by Bill Haywood, and more importantly, Eugene Debs, advocated the use of direct action, including sabotage, to achieve their goals.²⁵ The AFL had been established in 1886, and enjoyed relative success in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Crucially, Berger was not only a proponent of the AFL, but also “opposed attempts to commit the American Federation of Labor to socialist resolutions at its annual conventions in favor of a gradualist strategy...”²⁶ As Berger said,

“I do not propose to run the trade unions into a political machine nor the Socialist party into a trade union. However, I want the trade union to be part of the same movement as the political party... [T]his is the Wisconsin idea.”²⁷

This seemingly “soft” approach to unions was intolerable De Leon and his followers, the “Deleonites,” and they launched a number of vicious attacks Berger, and in his response to this attack, Berger lays out most clearly his vision of socialism. In an article replete with insults titled “No Impossibilism for Us!” Berger castigated those who claimed, “that nothing can be done under capitalism.”²⁸ In fact, “A great deal has been done under capitalism for the laboring class and for humanity. And a great deal more must be done, or Socialism will never be possible.”²⁹ Berger believed that work could be done under capitalism, and indeed much had been done to improve the lives of the proletariat. While these lines alone would have been enough for Berger to be attacked by those to his left, what he said next was, like Bernstein, seemingly beyond the

²⁵ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen Socialist*, 200-210.

²⁶ Lipset and Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 117

²⁷ Quoted in Lipset and Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 117

²⁸ Berger, “No Impossibilism For Us,” 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

pale of socialism.³⁰ In a statement that echoes the Bernstein refrain of being more interested in the movement of socialism and the policies that could aid the worker immediately than he was in “what is usually called ‘the final aim of socialism,’”³¹ Berger declared that:

“What interests us first, is the solution of those problems which Socialists must solve within the present society. (Emphasis mine.) Therefore, we are compelled to put forth and maintain the series of demands which form the working program of the Socialist platform. The Social Democratic Party is just a political party. If we were a mere sect, then we should only need a sort of confession of faith. As a political party, which wishes above all things to represent the wage-working class, it is our first duty to take care that all the people who perform the useful and necessary labor shall be economically, morally, and physically strengthened, rescued from extreme poverty and made capable of resistance in body and spirit. Every success in this direction will naturally compel us to work for those demands which are not yet attained. In this way, the present capitalist system — not without many dangers, and perhaps with repeated effusions of blood — will “grow into” (to use Liebknecht’s expression) the Socialistic system.”³²

³⁰ It should be noted that Victor Berger, at least on paper, maintained his belief that the final goal was revolution, not just reform. He wrote “We shall never forget for one moment that while the Social-Democratic Party fights the battles of the worker-now and here- while it fights the battle for honesty and for all the people alike as far as good government is concerned-the ultimate aim of our party is not reform, it is revolution-a legal and peaceable revolution, but none the less a revolution.” Berger, *Broadsides*, 265, quoted in ³⁰ Nash, “Making Marx Respectable,” 304. However, in practice he never introduced “radical” bills aimed at directly overthrowing the status-quo.

³¹Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, xxix.

³² Berger, “No Impossibilism For Us,” 3

Berger did not have any interest in or time for those who opposed him on the grounds that nothing could be done under the capitalist system. He believed that socialists could and should make progress under the current system, and that doing so was not antithetical to socialist praxis. Berger took this concept further in his defense against another one of the DeLeonites attacks. They accused Berger and his faction of “opportunism,” that is working with the middle class in order to pass legislation. Instead of denying these sins, Berger proudly stated that working with the middle class:

“is not treason, it is simply citizenship. All politics is compromise, because it means abiding by the will of the majority. And of course, we have not the majority. No real scientific Socialist will accuse the Social-Democratic Herald of “opportunism” because we believe in a policy of steady change...”³³

This statement is crucial to Berger’s conception of socialism. Although he did believe in revolution if “economic conditions (besides also the education and enlightenment of the people) are favorable towards a complete change,” practically he believed that part of socialism was working for improvements for the proletariat, regardless of a revolution, “within the present society.”³⁴ In fact, Berger took this to the extreme, seemingly believing that the difference between his socialist goals and the goals of the Populists and Progressives was simply that they “sought to preserve the existing system by reforming it; the Socialists desired to change it by the same methods.”³⁵ In fact, he declared in Congress in 1924 that he would vote with the Progressives on many questions “because there is not much difference between honest

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Nash, “ Making Marx Respectable,” 305

Progressives and the Socialists except that the Socialists go further in their program.”³⁶ This is not to suggest that Berger did not believe in the end goal of socialism being revolutionary change, as he clearly outlined in an 1898 article that American socialism, like all other socialism had the end goal of “the collective ownership of all the means of production and distribution,” and that it is “class conscious.” However, it is fair to argue that Berger certainly believed that revolution was not the be-all and end-all of socialism. While he may have shared with other Marxist’s the theory that the revolution was the ultimate goal, Berger considered the improvements made under to capitalist society to be part of socialism. Although he might have gone on to claim that “In short, American Socialists will be simply Socialists, and nothing else,”³⁷ he is not speaking of the Orthodox Marxism of Kautsky and Debs, and certainly not of the even more radical Socialism of De Leon or Luxemburg. He is speaking of his own unique blend of theories and practices, perhaps best encapsulated by his claim that “American Socialism means to support the true economic movement of the American wage workers,” that being, what might be a shock to traditional Marxists but fits perfectly with Berger’s theories, the “trade union movement” and the ballot box.³⁸ In fact Berger had little patience for those to his left who “simply want to make a noise like Socialists,” and spout off “impotent and good for nothing REVOLUTIONARY PHRASES [Sic] and holy words that are the stock in trade of certain hypocritical or ignorant “Socialist” shouters.”³⁹ Berger, who refused to attend a January 1905 meeting to discuss the formation of the IWW, and began to directly attack the IWW and its supporters. He vowed to Morris Hillquit that he would confront Debs,⁴⁰ though if he did, he was ineffective as Debs voiced total support for the creation of the IWW. This fight particular quarrel

³⁶ Victor Berger, *Voice and Pen* 44, quoted in Nash “Making Marx Respectable,” 305

³⁷ Berger, “American Socialism,” 1-3

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Berger, “No Impossibilism For Us,” 3

⁴⁰ Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs, Citizen Socialist*, 206

between Debs and Berger was not an isolated incident, as their differences in theory bled into differences in proposed practice and focus.

Socialism in Milwaukee

As Berger was the dominant force of socialism in Milwaukee, it should come as no surprise that the policies of the successful SDPW reflected his socialist theory. The policies that they advanced were denigrated by other Socialists as “sewer socialism,” but they were certainly amongst the most successful socialists in the country in terms of actually winning elections and advancing laws. In the 1910 Milwaukee mayoral elections, the first one that the socialists would win, they advocated “free medical care, public works for the unemployed, and public ownership of and operation of public service enterprises... and the encouragement of labor unions.”⁴¹ Although upon winning the election they were unable to institute many of these changes, over the coming decades of socialist control they would institute civil service standards in public offices and municipal ownership of street cars. They established city owned water and power services that were affordable and reliable. In addition, they built public housing projects for low-income families, established minimum wages for government employees, and endeavored to ensure that government contracts only went to companies that paid workers a fair wage. Finally, in line with their beliefs in the importance of access to outdoor space for people of all classes, they built several parks in Milwaukee, the most famous of which is Lake Park. All of these policies would lead Milwaukee to become recognized as one of America best governed cities.⁴² These policies, and more importantly the lack of seemingly “revolutionary” policies fit perfectly in line with Berger’s “evolutionary” and slow, step-by-step approach to socialism, the policy that he had outlined in his writings for various newspapers. It is crucial to remember that

⁴¹ Frederick I. Olson, *The Milwaukee Socialists, 1897-1941* (Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1952), 175-176 quoted in Lipset, and Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 117

⁴² Gary Dorrien, *American Democratic Socialism: History, Politics, and Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021)

the party, led by Berger, who himself became the first socialist to serve in the U.S House of Representatives after winning the seat in 1910, continued to call themselves socialists, not progressives or populists. This point is key – whether Debs and other socialists of the time agreed with them, and whether or not scholars looking back now question their socialist credentials is irrelevant. They were also the most successful socialist party in the United States. Berger would go on to win a seat in the House not just in 1910 but again in 1918, 1922, 1924, and 1926, the socialists would win 45 percent of seats in common council elections, and socialist candidate Daniel Hoan would serve as mayor of Milwaukee from 1916 to 1940. While there were other small pockets of socialist success in America, the SDPW was certainly the largest and most successful. Certainly, in comparison to the national SPA, the SDPW was far more successful. While it is true that Debs ran for President five times, winning 6% of the vote in 1912, and perhaps more impressively winning 3.4% of the vote from prison in 1920, Debs and the SPA never actually won any elections, and therefore never has the opportunity to directly enact any policies. It was the right wing of the party, led by Berger, that had success in the United States, while the left wing, led by the likes of Debs, De Leon, and Haywood, whether due to their refusal to participate in the electoral process for theoretical or reasons, or the general unpopularity of their ideas, was unsuccessful in their attempt to govern. This dichotomy extended to other areas, such as the unions, where the right wing and often Berger supported AFL was far more successful than the IWW, which was plagued by infighting, hampered by government interference, and never really able to become the union of all the proletariat. However, counter to the dominant opinion today, socialism, at least in some form, did not fail in America. Before turning to this point, and with it the larger problem of defining socialism, it is important to turn to the platforms of two other American political parties.

The Changing Politics of the American Political Parties

The SPA, SDPW, and the socialist movement as a whole, did not operate in a vacuum.

There were, of course other political parties and movements in the United States. One movement that, like the socialist movement seemed to have fizzled out, was the Progressive movement, who in 1912 ran Theodore Roosevelt as the candidate of the Progressive Party. When it comes to labor, their party platform looks like Victor Berger could have written it. Under a section titled “Social and Industrial Justice” in their plank, the Progressives advocated for:

“The supreme duty of the Nation is the conservation of human resources through an enlightened measure of social and industrial justice. We pledge ourselves to work unceasingly in State and Nation for:

Effective legislation looking to the prevention of industrial accidents, occupational diseases, overwork, involuntary unemployment, and other injurious effects incident to modern industry. The fixing of minimum safety and health standards for the various occupations, and the exercise of the public authority of State and Nation, including the Federal Control over interstate commerce, and the taxing power, to maintain such standards; The prohibition of child labor; Minimum wage standards for working women, to provide a "living wage" in all industrial occupations; The general prohibition of night work for women and the establishment of an eight hour day for women and young persons; One day's rest in seven for all wage workers; The eight hour day in continuous twenty-four hour industries; The abolition of the convict contract labor system; substituting a system of prison production for governmental consumption only; and the application of prisoners' earnings to the support of their dependent families; Publicity as to wages, hours and conditions of labor; full reports upon industrial

accidents and diseases, and the opening to public inspection of all tallies, weights, measures and check systems on labor products; Standards of compensation for death by industrial accident and injury and trade disease which will transfer the burden of lost earnings from the families of working people to the industry, and thus to the community; The protection of home life against the hazards of sickness, irregular employment and old age through the adoption of a system of social insurance adapted to American use;”⁴³

In this rather lengthy quote, the Progressives advocate for a program that focuses on workers’ rights in a way that Berger would have approved of. It is no wonder why Berger would state that he would often vote with the Progressives, and that the only real difference between them was a belief in a final revolutionary in goal. In practice, they were the same. The Progressives and their movement did not last for long, but the Democratic party, whose candidate Woodrow Wilson would win the heavily contested 1912 presidential election, is still around today. Their 1912 platform also contains language that Berger would have been proud of. Just fifteen years after the government had used the power of court injunction (and the military) to crush labor uprisings across the country, the Democratic party sated in their official plank that:

“Experience has proven the necessity of a modification of the present law relating to injunction... We believe that the parties to all judicial proceedings should be treated with rigid impartiality, and that injunctions should not be issued in any

⁴³ 1912 Progressive Party Platform
<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/progressive-party-platform-1912>

case in which an injunction would not issue if no industrial dispute were involved.”⁴⁴

This represents a scathing rebuke of the Republican governments who had suppressed workers’ rights through the use of legal injunctions, under the guise of anti-trust laws and other equally far-flung legal claims. The Democrats promised to end this practice and respect the rights of labor, as they believed “there should be no abridgment of the right of the wage-earners... to organize for the protection of wages and the improvement of labor conditions.”⁴⁵ In other parts of their platform, the Democrats advocated for policies that could have come straight from Berger’s SDPW, among them a commitment to more rigid civil service laws, a push for pension reform, and regulations of public services such as railroads companies, telegraph services, telephone companies.⁴⁶ It is fair to say that the successful platform of the Democrats, who won the election, and the popular platform of Progressive Party would have been very encouraging to Berger as a sign of the success of his unique flavor of slow and steady socialism.

The Surprising Success of American Socialism

The dominant theory today is that socialism failed in America. Many books have been written on the subject, including Sombart’s 1906 book “Why is There No Socialism in the United States,” Weinstein’s 1967 essay “The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912- 1925,” and Lipset and Marks’ “It Didn’t Happen Here: Why Socialism failed in the United States.” Each of these books, and the myriad of others on the subject, attempt to explain why socialism failed so spectacularly in America, unlike in Europe. No doubt some of these books have been written by self-proclaimed Marxists, who must defend why turn of the 20th century America, the country

⁴⁴ 1912 Democratic National Platform

https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss46029.mss46029-476_0018_1100/?sp=889&st=image

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

who based on Marx's theories of history and economics should have been the first country in the world to undergo revolution, as the conditions for such revolution were most ripe in America, failed to see a proletariat revolution. In fact, the opposite occurred, as America became increasingly successful under its capitalist system. All of these authors offer different reasons for the failure, from Weinstein's claim of "alienation" in 1919⁴⁷ to Lipset's many reasons including a difference union culture, the problem of immigration, and, of course, rabid in-fighting. However, these claims seem to miss the point entirely! What these books really seem to be asking, and answering, is the much less interesting question of why the socialist party failed in America. The opening lines of "It Didn't Happen Here" reads:

"Parties calling themselves Socialist, Social Democratic, Labor, or Communist, have been major forces in every democratic country in the world with the exception of the United States. From the time of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, those on the political left have tried to make sense of the failure of socialism in America."⁴⁸

The problem with these sentences is that they are not really as related as Lipset claims. After all, if today's Republican party rebranded themselves as the "Republican Socialist Party," but switched none of their policies or political theory, it is unlikely that Lipset, or anyone, would be satisfied that socialism was indeed successful in America. In short, the lack of a successful socialist party does not indicate the total failure of socialism in America. The only conceivable way that would be true is if "socialism" is strictly defined as a revolutionary ideology, incompatible with any other political party's platforms. If "socialism" is limited to the revolutionary ideas of Luxemburg and the orthodox Marxism of Kautsky and Debs, then the lack

⁴⁷ James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America: 1912-1925*. (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 339

⁴⁸ Lipset and Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 1

of a party would indeed signal an absence of socialism in America. However, if we are to take Berger and Bernstein at their word, that their beliefs also constitute a form of socialism, albeit a more slow-burning and politically involved socialism, then there is no reason to believe that socialism has not had a major impact on modern American politics. As can be seen from the party plank quoted above, the Democratic party in 1912, who would continue to slide left under Franklin D. Roosevelt, were already beginning to incorporate some of Berger's policies into their political plank. It would seem that in Berger's view, as long as the laws that were passed continued to move the country towards socialism, even if those passing them did not have revolutionary ideas in mind, then it can be claimed that socialism is alive and kicking. If Berger was confident in claiming that the SDPW was a genuine socialist party, and the reformist policies they advocated fit into socialist thought, then certainly it is difficult to claim that socialism did not, and does not, effect American politics. After all, there are to this day elected officials who affix the term "socialist" to various other political terms, such as "democratic," and more importantly of the policies that Berger believed in, and believed to be socialist, some are enshrined in law today and others are advocated for in Congress. While the Socialist Party of America failed, and with-it revolutionary Marxist socialism also failed in America, (much like in Germany where the SPD's policies are clearly a reflection of Bernstein's thought not Marx's) a more benign form of socialism, Berger's socialism, what was once derogatorily called "sewer socialism," continues to have a lasting impact on American socialism.

Conclusion: Berger's Continuing Impact

For the entirety of his presidency, Franklin Roosevelt would be pejoratively branded as a socialist by his enemies, and he spent years denying the accusations. This was sound political strategy, as the first red scare had already swept the nation, and there were already rumblings of shocking news coming out of the USSR. However, as wise as

this strategy was, and as insistent FDR was, given the rhetoric he used once in office, it not hard to imagine why his opponents might have claimed to hear the echo of Berger-ian socialism in his message. In a speech given at the 1936 Democratic National Convention, FDR declared, in reference to the darkest years of the Great Depression,⁴⁹

“For too many of us the political equality we once had won was meaningless in the face of economic inequality. A small group had concentrated in their own hands an almost complete control over other people's property, other people's money, other people's labor — other people's lives. For too many of us life was no longer free; liberty no longer real; men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness.”

Roosevelt placed an emphasis on the problems of economic inequality in the nation, going so far as to subversively imply that the inalienable laid out in the Declaration of Independence had been voided by unfettered capitalism. In his first ever inaugural address, FDR went even further, declaring that, “The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.”⁵⁰ Had Victor Berger been alive to hear that statement, there is no doubt he would have been overjoyed to hear what was essentially his message being publicly proclaimed by the newly elected president. It is clear that Berger and his brand of socialism had not disappeared from the politics of the United States. Rather, American Socialism continued to impact the United States of America. It found life in the New Deal policies of the 1930's and could be found lurking behind Eisenhower's Interstate Highway Bill, though

⁴⁹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, speech at Democratic National Convention, June 27, 1936.

⁵⁰ Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.

he might not have been aware of it. Over the ensuing decades radical changes came to American politics, eventually leading the rise of the Regan conservatives. Even as Regan took the White House, and as the fight over communism threatened to rip apart the small socialist movement, new terms such as “Market Socialism,” which often advocated for some sort of mixed economy, an idea that Berger certainly would have fought for, began to pick up steam. Even at its most fractured, the socialist movement in America continued to exist, sometimes within the Democratic Party, and sometimes in opposition to it.⁵¹ While it is true that under Clinton the Democratic party clearly coalesced around a decidedly non-socialist “third way,” Berger’s ideas were simply biding their time, waiting for their moment to reemerge, and reemerge they did in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. With the rise of the Obama administration, left wing politics once again reemerged, with the Affordable Care being a policy that Berger could only have dreamed. Most recently, Berger’s slow and steady socialism, and certainly Sewer Socialism, can be found in calls for public housing, the push for universal healthcare, and the expansion of government programs. These policies and the political theory they are based on are not foreign to America, nor are they new. While many might push back and argue that these programs are not “socialists” and not “Marxist, the response is simple: These policies fall perfectly in line with Berger’s socialist theory, they are policies he would have, and in some case did, advocate for, and therefore they are indeed socialist theories. It is perhaps possible that nowadays these policies are considered “social-democratic” or “democratic-socialist,” but to Berger they were simply part of the battle for socialism. Victor Berger

⁵¹ Dorrien, *American Democratic Socialism*

helped create and popularize his own form of socialism, a form that is now the dominant political form of socialism world-wide even in countries with political parties with the word “socialism” in their names. America too, though never explicitly, has incorporated Berger’s socialist values into its political system. To say that America never had a nationally successful socialist party may be correct, but it cannot be denied that Victor Berger’s socialist ideas continue to infiltrate and influence American politics to this day.

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