

## STATE OF THE UNION

*Marx and America's Unfinished Revolution*

TOWARDS THE CLOSE of the American Civil War Friedrich Engels wrote to Joseph Weydemeyer with the following prophecy: 'Once slavery, the greatest shackle on the political and social development of the United States, has been broken, the country is bound to receive an impetus from which it will acquire quite a different position in world history within the shortest possible time, and a use will then soon be found for the army and navy with which the war is providing it.'<sup>1</sup> Northern capitalism did indeed receive great impetus from the War, after which it embarked on headlong continental expansion. For three decades this proved to be such an absorbing task that little was done to project US power outside its own borders. William Seward, Secretary of State under Lincoln and then Johnson, wanted Caribbean acquisitions but the Radical Republicans were not interested. Troops were sent to repress the resistance of the Sioux and Apache, Alaska bought, and steps taken to modernize the navy; but for a generation the terrible losses of the Civil War bequeathed a great distrust of military adventures. The main issues in contention were, instead, three intimately interlinked processes that were of supreme interest to Marx and Engels: the advance of capitalism in North America, the unfolding of an epic class struggle and the progress made towards building a genuine workers' party. The outcome of this mighty contest was to determine the possibility, timing and character of any US bid for empire.

In the post-Civil War era the recently reunited United States was the most dynamic and soon largest capitalist state in the world. No country illustrated Marx's ideas with greater precision. Great railroads spanned the continent, vast factories sprouted up producing steel, agricultural

machinery, sewing machines. The emancipation of nearly four million slaves, the demobilization of a million and a half soldiers, and the arrival of a stream of new immigrants swelled the size of the most diverse labouring class in the world. Marx predicted that capitalist conditions would generate class conflict as workers were brought into contact with one another and discovered their common condition. While they might at first follow their employers, workers' attempts to acquire security and improved pay or conditions would repeatedly bring labour into conflict with them. This would teach the workers the need to organize and seek political representation. And since capitalism would create wealth at one pole and misery at another, and since it would be gripped by recurrent crises, the workers would be drawn to support increasingly radical measures.

'After the Civil War phase the United States are only now really entering the revolutionary phase', Marx wrote to Engels in April 1866.<sup>1</sup> The two men clearly expected more from the victory of the Union than the ending of slavery, momentous as that was. They also expected the producers to assert new political and social rights. If the freedmen moved simply from chattel slavery to wage slavery, if they were denied the right to vote, or organize, or receive education, then the term 'emancipation' would be a mockery. As it turned out, the era of Reconstruction did indeed bring a radical surge in both South and North, with the Republican Party seeking to keep abreast of events by adopting the ideas of radical abolitionists, black as well as white, and with pressure being exerted by a shifting coalition of labour unions, social reformers, African-American conventions, feminists and, last but not least, the multiplying American sections of the International Workingmen's Association.

The post-Civil War radicalization in North America in some ways may be compared with the British experience of slave emancipation and political reform in the 1830s. In both countries abolitionism and the 'free labour' doctrine seemed at one moment to consecrate wage labour and its central role within capitalism, only to give rise to popular movements—Chartism in Britain, a wave of class struggles and popular radicalism in the US—which challenged the given form of the bourgeois order. While the banner of free labour expressed bourgeois hegemony at one moment, it furnished a means of mobilizing against it at another. In one

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Engels to Joseph Weydemeyer, 24 November 1864.

<sup>2</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, New York 1961, p. 277.

register the ideal of free labour encouraged the aspiration of workers to become independent small producers, with their own workshop or farm. Hence the Republican slogan ‘free soil, free labour, free men’ and its embodiment in the Homestead Act of 1862.<sup>3</sup> But in the United States of the 1860s and 1870s, as in the Britain of the 1840s, there were increasing numbers of wage workers who did not want to become farmers and who looked to a collective improvement in the rights of working people.<sup>4</sup> Of course some workers did take up the offer of land, but many realized that this could prove a trap. Already by the late 1860s the farmers’ Grange movement was attacking exorbitant railroad freight rates and cut-throat competition from large producers.

The Gilded Age, with its robber-baron capitalists and titanic labour conflicts, served as a laboratory test for Marx’s ideas, and it vindicated many of them. But, despite several attempts, no broad-based working-class party emerged in the United States, and the country proved a laggard in developing a welfare state. In these respects much greater progress was made in Europe, especially in Marx’s native Germany, where the rise of a Social Democratic Party inspired by Marx’s ideas persuaded the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, to begin construction of a social security system. In what follows, I will look at the tremendous opportunities and challenges which Reconstruction, dubbed by Eric Foner ‘America’s unfinished revolution’, bequeathed to Marx and the supporters of the International in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

### *Reconstruction*

Marx had observed that labour in the white skin would not be truly free so long as labour in the black skin was in chains. This should be understood as a complex sociological proposition as much as a simple moral statement. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) abolishing slavery in the

<sup>3</sup> The classic study of the free-labour doctrine is Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, New York 1970.

<sup>4</sup> David Montgomery takes a sample of over seventy labour organizers of the later 1860s about whom information is available and finds that most of them were second-generation wage workers, with about half of them being British immigrants. Their efforts focused not on acquiring land but on regulating the conditions of labour and securing political and industrial representation for the working man. Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872*, New York 1967, pp. 197–229.

<sup>5</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, New York 1988.

United States ended a formal legal status that was already crumbling because of massive slave desertions, the Emancipation Proclamation and deep, disruptive inroads by the Union armies. The greater part of the Confederate forces melted away, and the planter class reeled from its spectacular defeat. But paradoxically local white power emerged in some ways stronger in the post-bellum era than before. Alarmed at the sight of free black people, former Confederate officers and men formed militia and patrols designed to defend white families from luridly imagined threats, to deny land or hunting to the freedmen and to ensure that they were still available for work. The new President in Washington shared and condoned this Southern white reaction, issuing thousands of pardons to Confederate officials. On 15 July 1865 Engels wrote to Marx attacking President Johnson: 'His hatred of Negroes comes out more and more violently . . . If things go on like this, in six months all the old villains of secession will be sitting in Congress at Washington. Without coloured suffrage nothing whatever can be done there.'<sup>6</sup>

The Republican Radicals in Congress narrowly failed to impeach Lincoln's successor but imposed much of their own vision of Reconstruction—including votes for the freedmen—on the former slave states, thanks to the presence of Union troops and to the emergence of Union Leagues drawing support from the freedmen and from Southern whites who resented the power of the planters. Nevertheless armed white vigilantes still lurked in the shadows and mounted attacks after dark.<sup>7</sup>

As the Northern public became aware of the new President's gross indulgence of traitors and of the planters' resort to violence in their attempt to rebuild a coercive labour regime, support for the Radicals grew. Northern outrage at the presidential pardons and at the vicious racial revanchism of the Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups led the Congressional Republican majority to support more radical measures and propose extending the vote to the freedmen of the South. The enfranchisement of black males was promoted by the Reconstruction Acts of 1867–68 and the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870) Amendments. In 1866–68 the Radical Republicans managed to overrule the President on key issues, and they retained some leverage in 1868 by endorsing General Ulysses S. Grant,

<sup>6</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Civil War in the United States*, pp. 276–7.

<sup>7</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*; and William McKee Evans, *Open Wound: The Long View of Race in America*, Urbana, IL 2009, pp. 147–74. See also David Roediger, *How Race Survived US History*, London and New York 2008, pp. 99–135.

the Union commander, as the Republican candidate in the presidential election. The new President gave his backing to a Republican strategy of restoring some of the sanctions on former Confederate officials and obliging the reconstructed states to give freedmen the vote as the price of re-entry to the Union.

Reconstruction set out to make freedom and equality more tangible, and for a while succeeded in curbing white terror and promoting black representation and equality. In Louisiana attempts had been made to segregate public space and means of transport. The state's 1868 Constitutional Convention asserted the novel concept of 'public rights', which would give equal access to public space. The Constitution's Bill of Rights declared that all citizens of the state should enjoy 'the same civil, political and public rights and privileges, and be subject to the same pains and penalties'. The concept was clarified by a prohibition of racial discrimination on public transport, and in places of public resort or accommodation. Rebecca Scott contrasts this clear requirement with the 'oblique language' of the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>8</sup>

Many abolitionists and Radical Republicans believed that the suppression of slavery was not enough and that the freedmen deserved at least free education, and preferably land and the vote as well. In this situation it was important that some Union Leagues were responsive to abolitionist appeals and that a convention of 144 black men from 18 states met in Syracuse, NY in October 1864. The Syracuse convention, and subsequent gatherings in Charleston and New Orleans, framed a broad programme for equal civic and political rights. Many of the participants in these events were already free before the War. They articulated the aspirations of black communities in Louisiana, the South Carolina islands and Tennessee—areas occupied by Union forces long before the final collapse. The African-American leaders argued that black soldiers had earned citizenship by helping to save the Union. They also paid their taxes and therefore deserved representation. At Syracuse, Charleston and elsewhere the call was not simply for rights in the abstract but for tangible expressions of a new status—the right to vote and serve on juries, and a Homestead Act for the South that would give land to the freedmen. A 'Declaration of Rights and Wrongs' adopted at both Syracuse and Charleston warned that measures favourable to the freedmen would

---

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery*, Cambridge, MA 2005, pp. 43–5.

be a hollow mockery if planters were still at liberty to intimidate and dragoon them.<sup>9</sup>

With Union soldiers on call, the freedmen voted in new officials and sent black Representatives and Senators to Washington. The Reconstruction administrations fostered a variety of social programmes. Lasting for between four and ten years, the Reconstruction regimes saw many black elected officials, both locally and in Washington. As Eric Foner explains, the Reconstruction governments were innovative: ‘Public schools, hospitals, penitentiaries, and asylums for orphans and the insane were established for the first time or received increased funding. South Carolina funded medical care for poor citizens and Alabama funded free legal counsel for indigent defendants.’<sup>10</sup> With some charitable assistance, the Reconstruction administrations laid the basis for an educational system that comprised university colleges as well as high schools open to the freed-people and their descendants. But the empowerment of the freedmen was carried through in the teeth of fierce resistance from white ‘rifle clubs’, the Ku Klux Klan and similar organizations. The Northern public was disturbed by the white terror and murderous ‘race riots’, but it had little patience for the heavy costs of an extended occupation and was demoralized by reports of carpet-bagger corruption. As the size of the Union occupation forces was continuously whittled down, white vigilantism was emboldened. Some attempts were made in South Carolina to defend Reconstruction by relying on local mixed militia, but eventually in the key states the Republican governors relied on Federal troops.<sup>11</sup> The deadlocked presidential election of 1876 led to a deal whereby the Republican went to the White House but the Federal Army was withdrawn from the South. The last Reconstruction governments collapsed, to be replaced by white ‘Redeemers’.

### *New voices*

During the heyday of Radical Reconstruction, Northern white working men also made important strides forward. Whereas the freed-people were in a struggle for the control of space, both public and private, the Northern workers sought to control time. In this industrializing

<sup>9</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*, Cambridge, MA 2003, pp. 103–5.

<sup>10</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 364.

<sup>11</sup> Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet*, pp. 302–13.

era the average working day was over eleven hours. In 1868 Congress was persuaded to establish an eight-hour legal working day for Federal employees. Eight states had similar laws though implementation was weak. Radical Reconstruction also favoured the first attempts to regulate the railroads. The stirrings of a new social utopianism and a very practical trade-union movement were encouraged by the polarizations around Radical Republicanism. Wendell Phillips led prominent abolitionists and some—but by no means all—Radicals in supporting Eight-Hour Leagues. In demanding the eight-hour day the ‘labour reformers’ were accepting ‘clock time’ and a degree of labour discipline as part of a wider scheme of improvement. Starting from free-labour principles Ira Steward argued that shorter hours meant higher pay and that higher pay would combat unemployment. As he bluntly put it, ‘new employments depend upon a more expensive style of living’.<sup>12</sup>

In 1866 a National Labor Union was formed to spread the eight-hour day demand. At its first national meeting the NLU declared: ‘The National Labor Union knows no north, no south, no east, no west, neither colour nor sex, on the question of the rights of labour.’<sup>13</sup> Some blacks joined the movement. The *New Orleans Tribune*, published by black journalists, supported the eight-hour movement, and a State Labor Convention in South Carolina called for a nine-hour day. A Colored Workers’ Convention in Washington in 1869 sought to build a bridge between organized labour and the freedmen. The mining districts of Tennessee were to be one of the few areas of the South where labour organizers made some headway, sometimes bringing together white and black workers.<sup>14</sup>

The North American Central Committee of the International Workingmen’s Association was founded in May 1871. Marx and his followers had moved the IWA’s headquarters to New York following the European panic occasioned by the Paris Commune. This is often seen as a ploy by Marx and his followers to prevent the IWA falling into anarchist hands. No doubt there is truth in this. Yet there was indeed, as Marx claimed, a promising opening in the United States in which the

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in David Roediger and Philip Foner, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day*, London and New York 1989, p. 85.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition, 1846–1876*, Chapel Hill, NC 1998, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> Karin Shapiro, *A New South Rebellion: The Battle Against Convict Labor in the Tennessee Coalfields, 1871–1896*, Chapel Hill, NC 1998.

International could begin to sink real roots in North America. By the early 1870s the IWA had fifty sections in a dozen urban areas, ranging from Boston and New York to San Francisco and Chicago. An African-American militia in New York was said to have affiliated to the International, but no such developments were possible in the South. A section of the International played a lead role in the first city-wide general strike, organized in St Louis in 1877.<sup>15</sup>

Some leading female abolitionists declined to support the Fourteenth Amendment on the ground that, while promoting the enfranchisement of black men, it left women without the vote.<sup>16</sup> This was an argument about priorities since nearly all abolitionists supported female suffrage. The great majority of abolitionists insisted that there were exceptional arguments for black male enfranchisement. The fact that African-Americans had risked their lives for the Union carried great weight with Northern voters, making it an immediately practical proposal.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore the black communities were more vulnerable to physical attack than white women, giving the former a greater claim to priority. Indeed, even with the vote, the difficulty of defending black communities in the South was to prove very great. However, these unhappy disputes did not prevent new attempts in the 1870s to explore the making of a progressive coalition, including female suffrage.

The appearance of the labour movements encouraged the view that a fresh start could be made in the 1870s, with the emergence of new issues and voices. Racism, sexism and conscious, or unconscious, bourgeois ideology continued to hold much of the population in thrall and to

<sup>15</sup> David Burbank, *Reign of the Rabble: The St Louis General Strike of 1877*, New York 1966.

<sup>16</sup> See Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, New York 1981, pp. 30–86.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Dykstra shows that military service was a trump card in the debate over enfranchising black men in Iowa. See Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier*, Cambridge, MA 1993. Women had been lauded for their contribution to the war as nurses and home-makers but the passage from this to enfranchisement proved more difficult. See also the introductions to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, *Correspondence, Writings, Speeches*, edited by Ellen Dubois, New York 1981, pp. 92–112, 166–9. Dubois argues that both women were, in different ways, both trying to adapt the women's movement to the need for wider alliances. While Anthony drew on 'free labour' ideology to criticize women's dependence, Stanton sketched the programmatic basis for an alliance between the women's and labour movements.

weaken progressive movements. But much more remarkable than this predictable state of affairs was the emergence of challenges to racism, including institutional racism, to male privilege in the home and workplace as well as ballot box, and to the divine right of employers to dictate to their employees and to accumulate vast personal fortunes.

For a brief span—about half a dozen years—the US sections of the IWA became the sounding board and banner for a diverse series of radical initiatives after the International itself had been formally dissolved. The IWA and the NLU were seen as sister organizations. The German-American Marxists wielded what was then a very novel doctrine—the idea that if labour was only sufficiently well-organized it would become a mighty lever for social advance, opening the way for all sections of the oppressed. The privileges of white and male workers were not addressed and all attention was focused on the great concentration of privilege represented by capital. In theory female and black workers were welcome to join the workers' organizations and would enjoy equal rights within them, though the practice often lagged behind. Some of the IWA's US sections developed a primitive and sectarian Marxism that contrasts with the programme and practice of the German Social Democratic Party. Marx and Engels themselves were often uneasy at the narrow-mindedness of their American followers, but they were partly responsible for this, since they had not yet developed a conception of the different character and goals of trade unions, on the one hand, and political parties, on the other.

The fact that the International embraced, or mixed, both types of organization was no bad thing, but because there had been no theorization of their distinct and different purposes there was often confusion and tension. There was also a dilemma posed by the scope for social alliances. The workers needed to organize themselves as a distinct body, yet they also needed to reach out to potential allies—farmers, farm labourers, progressive members of the middle class, home workers—on a range of issues. The implicit labour metaphysic of some of the German-American Marxists failed to tackle these issues. However, in the short run the International actually thrived by avoiding a clear stance on such questions and simply allowing each section to organize in its own way and according to its own priorities. The German-American Marxists might have been narrow-minded, but they were committed to the ideals of racial and gender equality, albeit that they soft-pedalled these issues when seeking to recruit *bona fide* wage workers who did not share such

principled commitments, arguing that it would be easier to educate them once they had joined the IWA.

### *Rights of all living things*

The IWA became a rallying point for many of the disparate forces of emancipation seeking to take part in the reconstruction of the social order. It attracted the attention of Victoria Woodhull—in some ways the Arianna Huffington of the 1870s—who edited the widely selling and much-discussed *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, and used it to publicize the initiatives of the IWA. In 1870 and 1871 the *Weekly* published several articles summarizing the *Communist Manifesto* and explaining the documents of the IWA. It exposed the schemes of the railway promoters and argued that the greed of the owners of the Staten Island ferry led them to skimp on safety, leading to a disaster in which a hundred passengers perished. An editorial explained: 'This is the age of rights when, for the first time in human history, the rights of all living things are, in some way, recognized as existing. We are far enough yet from according to all their rights, but we talk about them, we see them, and thought is busy to determine how best they should be secured.'<sup>18</sup>

A series of articles entitled 'Man's Rights, or How Would You Like It?' explored the idea of women taking leading positions in economic affairs while it was the turn of men to be 'housekeepers and kitchen girls'.<sup>19</sup> Other articles sought to reconcile a needed collectivism with the rights of the individual. The banks and the corporations should be taken into truly public ownership, and democratic institutions should ensure 'the personal participation of each in the preparation, administration and execution of the laws by which all are governed'. But the state should not seek to prescribe how people lived: 'Social freedom means the absolute immunity from impertinent intrusion in all affairs of exclusively personal concernment, such as scientific or religious belief, the sexual relationship, habits of dress, diet or the like'.<sup>20</sup> With her sister Tennie Claflin, Woodhull was the founder of Wall Street's first female brokerage, and used her rewards from this to finance the *Weekly*, 'the lady broker's

<sup>18</sup> 'The Rights of Children', *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, 6 December 1870.

<sup>19</sup> 'Man's Rights, or How Would You Like It?', *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, 8 September 1870.

<sup>20</sup> 'The International: Appeal of Section No. 12', *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, 23 September 1871.

paper'. Eclectic, literate and radical, the *Weekly's* lively interest in socialism and new forms of collective self-government led it to publish a special edition of Marx's *Address on the Civil War in France*. Marx wrote a friendly note to Woodhull and suggested that his daughter Jenny could supply an article on her experiences in France following the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871.<sup>21</sup>

In Europe respectable opinion was outraged by the supposed excesses of the Paris Commune. But in the United States the bloody suppression of the Commune provoked sympathy for its victims. Marx's *Civil War in France* was widely read by reformers and radicals. The IWA mustered a demonstration of 70,000 or more in New York in December 1871 to pay tribute to the Commune's tens of thousands of martyrs. The parade brought together the Skidmore Guards (a black militia), the female leadership of Section 12 (Woodhull and Claflin), an Irish band, a range of trade unions, supporters of Cuba's fight for independence marching under the Cuban flag, and a broad spectrum of socialist, feminist, Radical and Reform politics. In its aftermath Section 12, and its supporters within a new reform body, the Equal Rights Convention, proposed running a ticket in the forthcoming presidential election, with Victoria Woodhull and Frederick Douglass as the candidates. For a brief moment an attempt was made to present a progressive alternative in the 1872 elections, but it passed.<sup>22</sup>

Many of Marx's US followers distrusted Woodhull. She was the President of the American Association of Spiritualists and her Wall Street brokerage had the support of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the richest man in America. The IWA Council declared that wage-earners should comprise at least 66 per cent of the membership in all sections. Section 12 was suspended for failing to reach this figure. The inability to distinguish between trade union and party was part of the problem here. So too was the conception that workers' interests were somehow natural and sociologically

<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately this cordial tone was not maintained. Marx casually refers to Woodhull as 'a banker's woman, free lover and general humbug' in a later text; so far as sexual matters were concerned, Marx, the likely father of Frederick Demuth, was more deserving of the term 'humbug' than Woodhull. Messer-Kruse, *Yankee International*, p. 171.

<sup>22</sup> The classic survey of this moment is Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, with the IWA discussed on pp. 414–21. See also Samuel Bernstein, *The First International in America*, New York 1962; and Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America*, Oxford 1976, pp. 293–343.

given without benefit of ideology or politics. The sectarian exclusion of Section 12 weakened the International, though in the short run the dissension it aroused was eclipsed when Woodhull and her *Weekly* became embroiled in an unrelated obscenity suit which briefly led to her imprisonment and prevented her from developing her political profile. Her uncompromising attacks on sexual prudery led mainstream feminists and spiritualists, as well as socialists, to take their distance from her.<sup>23</sup>

### *Party vs union?*

There was to be a legacy of distrust and factional strife between those of Marx's German-American followers who believed that party building was the priority and others who saw the trade unions as the first task. The huge mid-century German immigration had had a transformative impact on American culture, as Bruce Levine shows in *The Spirit of 1848*. At a time when immigration was rising to new heights, Germans comprised roughly half of all newcomers, many of them radicalized by the experiences of 1848. With their breweries, beer gardens, musical concerts and *Turnvereine* (exercise clubs), the German radicals had furnished a strong secular current of anti-slavery before the Civil War. The more radical among them supported women's rights and suffrage: Mathilde Anneke published a German-language women's paper, while Margarethe Schurz was influential in the introduction of public kindergartens.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1870s, both 'Yankee' and German Internationalists deplored racial violence and supported female enfranchisement, but the trade unionists

<sup>23</sup> Amanda Friskin, *Victoria Woodhull's Sexual Revolution*, Philadelphia 2004.

<sup>24</sup> The founding statement of the American Workers League (*Amerikanische Arbeiterbund*) drafted by Weydemeyer and others in 1853 had declared that 'all workers who live in the United States without distinction of occupation, language, colour or sex can become members.' Today such a formula sounds entirely conventional, but in the 1850s it was very fresh. Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict and the Coming of the Civil War*, Urbana, IL 1992, p. 125. There was a conservative, familialistic formation within early German-American Marxism, sometimes regrettably endorsed by Marx; but the subsequent evolution of the Socialist Labor Party, the main German-American Marxist body, was towards more progressive positions on the 'woman question', as Mari Jo Buhle explains in *Women and American Socialism*, Urbana, IL 1981, pp. 1–48. The change was due both to an influx of women labour activists and to the influence of August Bebel's *Woman Under Socialism* (1879). Bebel, then chairman of the SPD, insisted that Social Democrats should fight for full equality for women, including the vote, and access to equal work at equal pay.

gave low priority to such issues, while many Socialists despised the narrowness and caution of the trade-union leaders. The prize was clear—steps that would lead to the establishment of a farmer-labour party on American soil. Robin Archer has recently shed new light on why this possibility was nipped in the bud. He sees this as happening because of a combination of ferocious repression, socialist sectarianism and the reluctance of workers' organizations to address political questions, since to do so would risk antagonizing the large number of religious workers with their ties to the existing two-party system.<sup>25</sup>

The party system was difficult to beat because it adjusted to the threat of third parties either by stealing their slogans or by ganging up against them—as the Republicans and Democrats did with their joint slate in Illinois in the 1880s. Successful labour leaders were wooed as candidates by the two established parties. But both parties took hand-outs from the robber barons, with state assemblies becoming the pawns of railway promoters and awarding them large tracts of public land in return for kickbacks. The state authorities also frequently used the state militia as strikebreakers. While striking workers sometimes enjoyed public support, the newspapers and middle-class opinion easily turned against them.

From the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and the Illinois and Pennsylvania miners and steelmen of the 1880s to the Pullman and Homestead strikes of the 1890s, the United States was shaken by epic and desperate industrial struggles. These battles involved tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands of workers and had no equal in Europe. The Great Strike of 1877 has been described as 'one of the bitterest explosions of class warfare in American history'.<sup>26</sup> It was provoked when the rail companies, responding to the economic crisis, sought to cut wages by 10 per cent. The rail workers had much public sympathy, and the large employers faced labour militancy in mines and steelworks as well as on the railroads. The strikes also tapped into widespread urban unrest. The strike gathered

<sup>25</sup> Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labour Party in the United States?*, Oxford 2008. This carefully researched and argued study is the most provocative work on its theme since Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, London and New York 1985, and extends the latter's comparison of the US and Australia.

<sup>26</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 383. For this momentous event see also Robert Bruce, 1877: *Year of Violence*, New York 1959 and Philip Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, New York 1977.

momentum because the militia units were loath to threaten lives. One of the militia commanders, Major General Alfred Pearson, explained: ‘Meeting an enemy on the field of battle you go there to kill. But here you had men and fathers, and brothers and relatives mingled in the crowd of rioters. The sympathy of the people, the sympathy of the troops, my own sympathy was with the strikers proper. We all felt that these men were not receiving enough wages.’<sup>27</sup>

Just as the withdrawal of Federal troops abandoned the field to semi-private white militias in the South, so the employers in the North were able to pay for thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of National Guards, specially recruited ‘deputy marshals’ and Pinkerton men to break the strike which spread until it had national scope.<sup>28</sup> One hundred strikers lost their lives in the course of the struggle. The employers brought in black workers to take their place. Some labour organizers concluded from this that blacks must be welcomed and organized too, but it took time for formal recognition to be translated into practical action.<sup>29</sup>

By the 1880s there were as many as 30,000 Pinkerton men, making them a larger force than the Army of the Republic. The latter’s strength had dropped to less than 27,000, with those soldiers not in the West reduced to strikebreaking roles. By 1877 the Democrats were calling for Army strength to be further reduced to no more than 20,000. The robber barons of the North and West, and the planters of the South, had found brutally effective ways to cow the direct producers. Both distrusted the Army and both hated the Federal taxing power. The steep reductions in the Federal military establishment reflected the conviction of many employers in all sections that the Army that stemmed from the Civil War and Reconstruction was not well adapted to enforcing labour discipline. Stephen Skowronek describes the closing decades of the nineteenth century as the epoch of the ‘patchwork state’ and emphasizes the role of labour struggles in shaping its peculiar formation.<sup>30</sup> While the

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in John P. Lloyd, ‘The Strike Wave of 1877’, in Aaron Brenner, Benjamin Day and Immanuel Ness, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, Armonk, NY 2009, p. 183. On subsequent struggles, see Theresa Ann Case, ‘Labor Upheavals on the Nation’s Railroads, 1877–1922’, in this valuable reference work.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Yellin, *American Labor Struggles, 1877–1934*, New York 1937.

<sup>29</sup> Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society*, pp. 131–208.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920*, Cambridge 1982, pp. 38–84.

ante-bellum regime defended plantations without regulating them, the post-bellum one performed a similar service for the new corporations.

### *Defeats and triumphs*

The double defeat of Reconstruction had suppressed black rights in the South and curtailed labour rights in the North. Jim Crow in the South, and the widespread use of Pinkerton's men and other goons in the North, were both victories for privatized violence and for a minimal view of the state. They were a defeat for the republican ideal of a unified and responsible Federal authority. In the great battles of the 1880s and 1890s hundreds of strikers were killed, thousands imprisoned and tens of thousands blacklisted. These gruelling labour battles are a civilian echo of the Civil War. The railroad corporations sought to cultivate military-style discipline, furnishing their workforce with uniforms and insignia, with a famous general or two on the board.

While there was orchestrated violence in the North it was put into the shade by Jim Crow. From 1884 to 1899, between 107 and 241 blacks were murdered each year by lynch mobs, with total victims numbering over 3,000. Lynchings were concentrated in the South and the great majority targeted blacks, but they were not unknown elsewhere and sometimes targeted white labour organizers, Chinese and Mexicans. Along the Mexican border, dozens of Hispanics were lynched during these years. And there were also lynchings of whites in other parts of the Union, especially the 'wild' West.<sup>31</sup> The intensification of Jim Crow in the South was accompanied by the spread of onerous, if less extreme, practices of racial exclusion in other areas, affecting residence, employment and education.<sup>32</sup>

The freed-people of the South and the labour organizers of the North not only faced physical threats but also found their attempts to organize and negotiate assaulted in the name of the same conservative strain

<sup>31</sup> Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black–White Relations in the American South since Emancipation*, Oxford 1984, pp. 117–8, 185–9; Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings* (1892), with an introduction by Patricia Hill Collins, Amherst, NY 2002, pp. 201–2.

<sup>32</sup> Desmond King and Stephen Tuck, 'De-Centring the South: America's Nationwide White Supremacist Order after Reconstruction', *Past and Present*, February 2007, pp. 213–53.

in free-labour ideology—that which construed any regulation or combination as a violation of ‘freedom of contract’. The Republicans and Democrats deferred to this doctrine and the Supreme Court codified it. These rulings pulverized the workers and sharecroppers, leaving them to negotiate only as individuals.

### *American social democracy?*

Without a political order capable of regulating the employers, the case for a social democratic party was more difficult to make, and to some a syndicalist perspective seemed more realistic. Another obstacle to proposals for a labour party was the fact that the Federal state was fiscally hamstrung, rendering impractical projects for a welfare state. The Union’s vast Civil War outlays had been met, in part, by a progressive income tax. This tax had been proposed by Schuyler Colfax, a Radical Republican representative from Indiana, who later served as Grant’s Vice President.<sup>33</sup> However, in the early 1870s the income tax was dropped—and then declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The Fourteenth Amendment had promised ‘all persons’ the equal protection of the laws. While this proved a dead letter so far as the freedmen were concerned, the corporations—who enjoyed the legal status of persons—successfully invoked it against measures of corporate taxation and regulation.

These and other reactionary developments might themselves have increased the willingness of the trade unions to back a labour party. Indeed those trying to organize general or industrial unions aimed at the mass of workers realized that they needed the support of government. But Archer claims that many key craft leaders—especially Samuel Gompers—had greater industrial bargaining power and feared that their organizations might be put at risk if they teamed up with political adventurers.

Several key trade unions had been inspired by the agitation surrounding the IWA and Marx’s writings on the importance of the self-organization of workers. A number of US unions were to describe themselves as ‘International’ organizations—the International Longshoremen or International Garment Workers Union and so forth—echoing the IWA. Sometimes the word ‘International’ was justified by reference to organizing in Canada, but its resonance also owed something to the

---

<sup>33</sup> W. Elliot Brownlee, *Federal Taxation in America*, Cambridge 1996, p. 26.

IWA. If Marx's followers—many of them German-Americans—can take a share of the credit for the impetus given to trade-union organization they must also accept some of the blame for the failure of the US workers' movement to develop a labour party, and for the related weakness and tardiness of the development of a US welfare state. Indeed some blame the influence of Marx for these failures.<sup>34</sup>

Yet Marx favoured both trade unions and social-democratic or socialist parties in the 1870s, as may readily be seen in the case of Germany. The German SPD was clearly linked to and supportive of organized labour, but its Erfurt programme committed it to revolutionary and democratic objectives, and to immediate reforms. It campaigned for votes for women and the defence of the German forests. It later supported rights for homosexuals and an end to Germany's imperial exploits in Africa, and it debated the 'agrarian question'.<sup>35</sup> The breadth of the SPD's programme did not, of course, wholly stem from Marx but from several other currents, including that of the Lassalleans. Though Marx had tenaciously fought against what he saw as Lassalle's misguided belief in the progressive character of the German state, he nevertheless went out of his way to cultivate his acquaintance, gently to warn him of his mistakes and above all to remain in touch with the tens of thousands of German socialists who were influenced by Lassalle.

The programmatic scope of the SPD is not the only evidence of the approach favoured by Marx and Engels. The platform of the French workers party was directly inspired by a conversation with Marx. Its very first clause declared that 'the emancipation of the class of producers involves all mankind, without distinction of sex or race'.<sup>36</sup> Other clauses committed the party to universal suffrage and equal pay for equal work. No doubt economism still lurked, but in 1879 it was not such a bad starting point. The counterposing of trade union and political organization as

<sup>34</sup> Both Messer-Kruse, *Yankee International* and Archer, *Why Is There No Labour Party in the United States?* come close to this but ultimately concede that there was a large gap on such questions between Marx and those who regarded themselves as his followers in the US, which included Samuel Gompers.

<sup>35</sup> I have a brief discussion of the programmatic ideas of the SPD in 'Fin de Siècle: Socialism After the Crash', NLR 1/185, January–February 1991. For the party's positions on sexuality see David Fernbach, 'Biology and Gay Identity', NLR 1/228, March–April 1998, p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> 'Introduction to the Programme of the French Workers Party', in Marx, *Political Writings*, vol. 3, London 1974, p. 376.

mutually exclusive by supposedly Marxian US Socialists and trade unionists put them at odds with their mentor.

In 1887 Engels paid tribute to the giant strides being made by the American workers' movement, embracing momentous class battles in Illinois and Pennsylvania, the spread of the Eight-Hour Leagues, the growth of the Knights of Labor, the sacrifices that had established May 1st as International Labour Day and the electoral achievements of the first state-level labour parties.<sup>37</sup> But appreciative as he was, he insisted that the whole movement would lose its way unless it could develop a transformative programme: 'A new party must have a distinct platform', one adapted to American conditions. Without this any 'new party would have but a rudimentary existence'. However, beyond saying that the kernel of this programme would have to be public ownership of 'land, railways, mines, machinery etc', he did not speculate as to what problems that programme should address. Engels rebuked the doctrinaires of the heavily German-American Socialist Labor Party for their hostility to unions and failure to grapple with American reality. He urged them to 'doff off every remnant of their foreign garb', 'go to the Americans who are the vast majority' and 'on all accounts learn English'.<sup>38</sup>

The advice Engels offered, though entirely justified, was also elementary and even simplistic. Programmatic thinking was not entirely lacking in the United States, but it was throttled by the given forms of the labour movement. In many trade unions there was a formal ban on any political discussion, on the grounds that it would prove divisive. The largest working-class organization, the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, had a similar ban. The Knights of Labor only emerged from clandestinity in 1881 and never entirely shook off its roots as a secret society. Security threats—and its leaders' fears of foreign revolutionaries—distracted it from public debate of its objectives. The unions and the Knights made some efforts to organize black and female workers but had no discussion of how, practically, to advance their rights.<sup>39</sup> Engels's text was most likely to be read by the members of the Socialist Labor Party, but he did not go far enough in pressing them to become relevant to US conditions.

<sup>37</sup> Engels, 'Preface to the American Edition', *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, New York 1887.

<sup>38</sup> Engels, 'Preface to the American Edition', p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, pp. 30–1.

Engels's insistence that the US labour party would have to commit itself to nationalization of the railways and steel was timely—and if heeded by some Progressive coalition, public ownership might have averted the disaster awaiting these industries in the twentieth century. His brief list should have included the public ownership of banks, since they were critical to industry and agriculture. His call for the nationalization of land short-circuited the tangled problems of the country's three million farmers and four million tenants and labourers. By the time of the 1870 census there were 4.9 million wage earners, some of them white collar, but the agricultural sector was still very important. The spread of the Farmers' Alliance in the 1880s and 1890s showed the huge scope there was for mobilizing indebted farmers and rack-rented tenants or share-croppers, both black and white. Engels endorsed the idea that a US labour party should aim to win a majority in Congress and elect its candidate to the White House, but without an appeal to farmers, tenants and rural labourers—and much else besides—this was a pipe dream. While Marx and Engels were quite right to shun many of the 'sentimental reformers' with their patented cure-alls, some of these individuals focused on critical issues of taxation and banking, or security and democracy. The milieu of labour reformers had identified and skilfully exploited the issue of the eight-hour day, a programmatic demand that had a mobilizing and universalist impulse (though enforcement was often difficult in US conditions). Quaker radicals were later to support Ida B. Wells's campaigns against segregation and lynching.

The London International had cordial relations with Richard Hinton, a labour reformer and organizer of the Washington, DC Section. When the German Marxist leader Friedrich Sorge sought to bring this section under his control, the General Council in London declared that this was going too far and that the Section should run its own affairs. Indeed, the Washington Section refused to back Sorge's expulsion of Section 12. The British-born Hinton was a former companion of John Brown and officer of the First Kansas Coloured Regiment and a man fascinated by Edward Kellogg's plan for a network of public banks and Osborne Ward's proposals for cooperative agriculture and industry. In late nineteenth-century conditions the smallholder was on a hiding to nothing—cooperatives with some public support could have made a lot of sense. Hinton's Section included many civil servants who would actually have to implement any massive programme of nationalization. They were probably aware that the country only had 60,000 civil servants and any socialist

plan would have to stimulate local publicly or socially owned enterprise and bottom-up initiatives.<sup>40</sup> Hinton was later to be associated with Eugene Debs's Socialist Party, as editor of its magazine.

In his survey Engels developed a very polite critique of the ideas of Henry George, even conceding that the land tax might have some role. Another radical taxation proposal that merited examination was Schuyler Colfax's idea of a levy on all shareholding capital. Finally there was the issue of Lincoln's very unfinished revolution in the US South. Prior to the triumph of the ultra-racists in 1900 there were several movements which showed that white and black farmers and labourers could work together—they included the Readjusters, who gained power in Virginia in the late 1870s, the Farmers' Alliance, some branches of Populism and the fusion movement in North Carolina.<sup>41</sup>

In private correspondence Engels had a poor view of the theoretical grasp of the American Marxists and socialists. But within a little more or less than a decade of his death three outstanding works appeared that would very likely have changed his view: Louis Boudin, *The Theoretical System of Karl Marx* (1907); Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Civilization* (1904) and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The eruption of titanic class struggles also had an impact on currents in US intellectual life far removed from Marxism. Eugene Debs's American Railway Union (ARU) broke with the caution of craft unionism and tried to organize the entire railroad industry. In 1894 the ARU forced major concessions from the Great Northern railroad, and its membership grew to 150,000. However, when the ARU showed that it could paralyse one half of the entire rail network, the Grover Cleveland Administration stepped in to break the strike through injunctions and imprisonment. A conversation with an ARU picket had an electrifying impact on the philosopher John Dewey:

My nerves were more thrilled than they had been for years; I felt as if I had better resign my job teaching and follow him round til I got into life. One lost all sense of the right and wrong of things in admiration of his absolute almost fanatic sincerity and earnestness, and in admiration of the magnificent combination that was going on. Simply as an aesthetic matter, I don't believe the world has seen but few times such a spectacle of magnificent union of men about a common interest as this strike evinces . . . The govt is

<sup>40</sup> Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, pp. 387–477.

<sup>41</sup> Evans, *Open Wound*, pp. 175–87.

evidently going to take a hand in it and the men will be beaten almost to a certainty—but it's a great thing and the beginning of greater.<sup>42</sup>

Eugene Debs was arrested for defying the government injunction and read Marx's work in jail. Marx's ideas were themselves beginning to influence the culture of US radicalism just as they were also, in their turn, shaped by the American experience of robber-baron capitalism and desperate class struggle. Marx's dark vision clearly supplies the central themes of Jack London's extraordinarily powerful novel *The Iron Heel*, a book read by millions in a large number of languages—and a book which, many claimed, changed their lives. The history of the United States in the Gilded Age had resonated with such epic class struggles that they fleshed out the social imaginary of socialists, and other radicals, not just in North America but in Europe and far beyond—Latin America, Asia and Africa. The New World had always tapped into European utopian longings, sometimes accompanied by dystopian fears too. The United States of the great capitalist trusts, and their Congressional marionettes, offered an awesome spectacle—but so did the resistance of its workers and farmers. The international day of the working class, May 1st, after all memorializes the Haymarket martyrs of May 1886. So just as the US capitalist, with top hat and cigar, typified the boss class, so the US workingman, with his shirt and jeans or overalls, became the image of the proletarian. The set-piece battles in industrial America between the two were typically on a larger scale than European industrial disputes. There is, of course, irony in the fact that, however iconic, the US worker was ultimately defeated or contained, while organized labour in Europe and the Antipodes secured representation and even some social gains.

A factor in the vulnerability of US labour was its failure to live up to the anti-racial ideals that had been widely proclaimed in the period of Reconstruction. Employers were often able to exploit and foster racial antagonism. The more ideological wing of German-American socialism never recanted its commitment to human unity. Even a writer as critical of the German-American Marxists as Messer-Kruse concedes that they 'never renounced their devotion to the principle of racial equality',<sup>43</sup> something which cannot be said of several traditions of Anglo-American

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, New York 2001, p. 295; see also David Montgomery's Epilogue in Richard Schneirov et al., eds, *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s*, Urbana, IL 1999, pp. 233–50.

<sup>43</sup> Messer-Kruse, *Yankee International*, p. 188.

socialism. Indeed whatever their other failings, twentieth-century American Marxists, white as well as black, were to make an outstanding contribution to the battle against white racism and for civil rights. No other political current has such an honourable and courageous record.

It remains only to address a final problem. Marx's conception of history bequeathed a theoretical puzzle to later historical materialists—namely, what is the role of the individual in history? Such powerful writers and thinkers as Plekhanov, Deutscher, Sartre and Mandel debated the topic, drawing attention to the fact that even deep-laid historical processes often depend on highly personal capacities and decisions. Via the IWA, Marx had an impact on a generation of American workers and radicals but, despite heroic battles, it proved unable to build a political workers' movement to compare with those in Europe and the Antipodes. Engels was greatly invigorated by his visits to New York and Boston in 1888. This leads me to a final thought. If Marx or Engels had themselves sailed from England to make their home in New York or Chicago, might they have been able to educate their followers and find a more promising path of political development for the American Left?

There is no way of knowing. But if their conduct in Germany in 1848–49, or in the 1860s, is any guide, Marx and Engels might well have helped to consolidate the International's achievements. They would very likely have favoured opening the unions to the generality of workers and they would surely have given exceptional importance to curbing the freelance violence of the Southern 'rifle clubs' and Northern company goons. Marx would have urged workers to develop their own organizations. But, just as he saw the importance of the slavery issue at the start of the Civil War, so he would surely have focused on 'winning the battle of democracy', securing the basic rights of the producers—including the freedmen—in all sections as preparation for an ensuing social revolution. Eschewing reactionary socialism or the counterfeit anti-imperialism of some Southern slaveholders, they would have insisted that only the socialization of the great cartels and financial groups could enable the producers and their social allies to confront the challenges of modernity, and to aspire to a society in which the free development of all is the precondition for the free development of each.