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The Future That Never Happened

By Leonard P. Liggio

Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks.

It Didn't Happen Here:

Socialism Failed in the United States. W. W. Norton & Company. 379
\$26.95

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Socialism is fading throughout the Western world. In Germany decades of immobility by the centrist Christian Democrats, ta now been reduced substantially by a Social Democratic gover Australia and New Zealand, where conservative governments pursued interventionist policies and left economies wracked by inflatio parties now apply neoliberal market principles. According to Seymour Lipset and Gary Marks, the greatest ideological distance has been trav Labour Party in Britain, whose leader, Prime Minister Tony Blair, stat interview that his administration would "leave British law the most res trade unionism in the Western world."

While the death knell sounds for socialist theories, it may be timely to again the old question of why the United States never experienced a so movement with the strength and durability of those in Europe or the revolutionary force of those elsewhere in the world. Lipset and Marks topic in their fine new book, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism F United States*.

At first, socialists turned a hopeful eye to American shores. After all, b nineteenth century the United States had the most advanced capitalist e in the world. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and other socialist thinkers b that a mature capitalist society would produce contradictions that woul workers into a socialist mass movement. As we know, it soon became that capitalism was not headed into collapse. The increasing mechaniz industry did not deprive businessmen of the surplus value "expropriate their laborers; rather, it created enormous windfalls, and at the same ti goods available to a broader proportion of the population than ever bef

Still, the American working class was not without grievances. As Lips Marks tell it, the Socialist Party of America did find limited popular su the first decades after its founding in 1901. But the party achieved its v circumscribed success by maintaining its distance from European socia instead, by laying claim to distinctively American values.

Much credit for the early success of the Socialist Party is due to its most charismatic leader, Eugene Victor Debs of Indiana, who first gained prominence organizing railway workers. In the 1912 presidential election, with Debs as the Socialist candidate, the Socialists received almost a million votes. They also did so in 1920, while Debs was in an Atlanta federal prison, serving time on a conviction for speaking against the 1918 war bond drive. Popular outcry eventually led Republican Warren Harding to release Debs from prison. Throughout his career, Debs portrayed himself as a victim of government repression and capitalized on the American tradition of sympathy for fear and hostility to the state.

Few socialists found their way into Congress, the most notable of these was Victor Berger, elected many times from Milwaukee, and Meyer London from Manhattan's Lower East Side. Numerous cities, however, elected socialist mayors. Mayors Daniel Hoan in Milwaukee and Jasper McLevy in Bridgeport, Conn., were both longstanding Socialist Party members. The populations repeatedly elected these men were not a stereotypical propertyless proletariat. The workers in these cities were homeowners and civic participants — members of unions and fraternal and life insurance societies.

In another contrast to European-style socialism, low taxes were a major successful Socialist Party platform. In Milwaukee, according to Lipset and Marks "[p]roperty taxes under successive socialist mayors from 1910 to 1923 were actually lower than in the period before and after their administration. Socialist-led municipalities placed a strong emphasis on fiscal restraint, efficiency and on eliminating corruption. They often had the full support of the business community in addition to homeowners and workers. Victor Berger, a leading socialist in Milwaukee, emphasized the consonance of socialism with those of the American Founders, declaring in 1905: 'Friedrich Engels said: 'Give every citizen a good rifle and fifty cartridges and you have guaranteed the liberty of the people.' Thomas Jefferson held the same view exactly.'"

Lipset and Marks provide an important analysis of the early American labor union movement, one which goes far in explaining the failure of European socialism to win adherents in the United States. In their book, entitled "American Antistatism and Labor," the authors argue that the American labor movement long opposed programs that would have expanded the role of the government. The reasoning behind this attitude, expressed eloquently by labor leader Samuel Gompers, was that the state would be far less likely to protect the American worker than to serve the interests of his corporate masters. Gompers was a London-born cigar maker who emigrated to New York. He was president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) from 1880 to 1923 (except for 1895, after he was defeated by a Socialist Party candidate). Gompers advocated "the wage-earners doing for themselves what they could toward working out their own salvation," massing their own collective power against the power of the industrialists, without the intervention of the state. The authors note that "the AFL was opposed to state provision of old-age pensions, compulsory health insurance, minimum wage legislation, and unemployment compensation, and from 1914 on was against legislating minimum hours."

men." Quoting historian David DeLeon, they argue that "'Social democracy, communism, and other relatively authoritarian movements that rely up coercive centers of state power' have run against deep libertarian currents in American culture and as a result have never succeeded in developing d

The size and diversity of America's immigrant population presented formidable obstacles, cultural and organizational, to the American socialist movement. Lipset and Marks report that by the mid-nineteenth century, only one-fifth of wage earners in the United States had native white parents, and almost half were of immigrant origin. The labor force in the United States was the most ethnically heterogeneous in the world, they state, and by 1930 one-third of the total population was of foreign stock." Seeking to explain why the party failed to gain the allegiance of the poorest, most vulnerable segment of the population," Lipset and Marks point to the difficulties of uniting immigrants of different languages and cultures — populations which competed for jobs, and whose ethnic animosities were often encouraged by employers and politicians. Studies have shown that immigrants were far more likely to look to their co-ethnics for help than to a political movement for help with their immediate need for long-term security. Jewish and Catholic immigrants created flourishing fraternal societies that provided social services and health, unemployment and life insurance. Fraternal life insurance companies had 8.5 million members by 1910; more wage earners were members of fraternal societies than of labor unions. The proliferation of voluntary associations among Jewish, Italian, and Slavic immigrants in cities like Chicago and New York amazed reform

Moreover, the traditions immigrants brought from the old world were often hostile to socialist aims. Lipset and Marks point particularly to resistance to socialism among immigrants from Catholic countries. Political observers already commenting on this phenomenon in the years before World War I, and Marks cite British author G.D.H. Cole, who wrote, "the growing political strength of Catholicism was of great influence in keeping the Trade Union movement from any movement wearing a socialist label or 'tainted' with class war or materialist philosophy of action." Lipset and Marks argue that while leaders in the United States endorsed trade unionism, they repeatedly rejected socialism and pronounced the sanctity of private property. In doing so, they followed the lead of the Vatican, which condemned socialism in the papal encyclicals of 1891 and 1903. Archbishop Sebastian Messmer of Milwaukee did not transgress the bounds of his authority in declaring that "the private ownership of property is supported by the gospel apostolic teaching, and the rules of the Church, and is a divine ordination, not to be changed by the hand of man cannot be a Catholic and a Socialist."

As the proportion of Catholic workers grew, the American Catholic Church had direct influence over the political leanings of the labor movement. Church leaders urged the American Federation of Labor to adhere to Catholic views and to eschew political remedies in favor of "pure and simple" trade unionism. They were persuasive. Lipset and Marks write that "Samuel Gompers, although a Jew, worked hard to convince Catholic church leaders that the labor movement was sympathetic to their outlook."

This analysis contrasts with the traditional linking of capitalism and democracy with the Protestant faith, an association that arises from Max Weber's original formulation in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Lipset and Marks argue the opposite: that there is a strong correlation between capitalism and Catholicism. They point out that "in Germany, socialism flourished primarily in the Protestant areas in the east, e.g., Prussia, while in western Germany, the Catholic Church, as in Latin Europe, repeatedly condemned atheistic materialistic socialism and weakened the appeal of the Social Democratic party." Recent studies have demonstrated that Catholic immigrants were longtime supporters of the liberal parties in England, and Australia, and the U. S. Democratic Party. As these parties strayed from the principles of individual liberty, sound money, parental rights, and voluntary government, however, Catholics moved to the parties that newly espoused them, as the Republican party has done since the New Deal. Lipset and Marks do, however, lay at Protestantism's feet another trait that repeatedly bedeviled the American Socialist Party — a tendency towards sectarianism, doctrinal wrangling, and schism.

Lipset and Marks thus demonstrate how homegrown traditions of mistrust of state power and respect for private property interacted with the attitude of immigrant populations to deny European theorists' dreams of a socialist America. They give credit to American affluence and social mobility. They point out the reasons why the significant labor unrest of the years surrounding the turn of the century was not often expressed in political terms. And they point out structural features, foremost among them our two-party system, that made it difficult for the Socialist Party to gain a political foothold. It is by this attention to historical circumstance, as well as a grasp of broad cultural trends, that Lipset and Marks make an important contribution to a discussion that has often been marred by overgeneralizations on one side of the political spectrum and bitterness and self-delusion on the other.

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 Published by the **Hoover Institution**