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

(Now to Print Friendly Version)

Socialism is fading throughout the Western world. In Germany decades of immobility by the centrist Christian Democrats, now been reduced substantially by a Social Democratic gover Australia and New Zealand, where conservative governments pursued interventionist policies and left economies wracked by inflation 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, in the nineteenth century the United States had the most advanced capitalist in the world. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and other socialist thinkers b that a mature capitalist society would produce contradictions that would 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 charismatic leader, Eugene Victor Debs of Indiana, who first gained prominence organizing railway workers. In the 1912 presidential election, with Debs as candidate, the Socialists received almost a million votes. They also did well in 1920, while Debs was in an Atlanta federal prison, serving time on a conviction for speaking against the 1918 war bond drive. Popular outrider 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 the underdog and hostility to the state.

Few socialists found their way into Congress, the most notable of these being Victor Berger, elected many times from Milwaukee, and Meyer Londo, 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 populists repeatedly elected these men were not a stereotypical propertyless proletariat. The workers in these cities were homeowners and civic participants — of unions and fraternal and life insurance societies.

In another contrast to European-style socialism, low taxes were a major plank on the Socialist Party platforms. In Milwaukee, according to Lipset, property taxes under successive socialist mayors from 1910 to 1914 were actually lower than in the period before and after their administration. Socialist-led municipalities placed a strong emphasis on fiscal restraint and efficiency and on eliminating corruption. They often had the full support of the business community in addition to the homeowners. Victor Berger, leading socialist in Milwaukee, emphasized the consonance of socialism with those of the American Founders, declaring in 1905: "Friedrich En said: 'Give every citizen a good rifle and fifty cartridges and you have no guarantee for the liberty of the people.' Thomas Jefferson held the same.

Lipset and Marks provide an important analysis of the early American labor movement, one which goes far in explaining the failure of European socialism to win adherents in the United States. In a book entitled "American Antistatism and Labor," the authors argue that the American labor movement long opposed programs that would have extended the range of the government. The reasoning behind this attitude, expressed 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 the corporate elite. Gompers was a London-born cigar maker who emigrated to New York. He was president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) from 1895 to 1923 (except for 1895, after he was defeated by a Socialist Party candidate). Gompers advocated "the wage-earners doing for themselves what they can toward working out their own salvation," massing their own collective strength 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 hourly wages.
men." Quoting historian David DeLeon, they argue that "Social demo communism, and other relatively authoritarian movements that rely up coercive centers of state power" have run against deep libertarian current American culture and as a result have never succeeded in developing d

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

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

As the proportion of Catholic workers grew, the American Catholic ch had direct influence over the political leanings of the labor movement. leaders urged the American Federation of Labor to adhere to Catholic views and to eschew political remedies in favor of "pure and simple" tra unionism. They were persuasive. Lipset and Marks write that "Samuel although a Jew, worked hard to convince Catholic church leaders that sympathetic to their outlook."
This analysis contrasts with the traditional linking of capitalism and democracy with the Protestant faith, an association that arises from Marx's original formulation in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* 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, whereas 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 principles of individual liberty, sound money, parental rights, and voluntary associations, 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 A Socialist Party — a tendency towards sectarianism, doctrinal wrangling.

Lipset and Marks thus demonstrate how homegrown traditions of mistrust and state power and respect for private property interacted with the attitude and immigrant populations to deny European theorists' dreams of a socialist America. They give credit to American affluence and social mobility, while pointing out the reasons why the significant labor unrest of the years surrounding the end of the century was not often expressed in political terms. And they point to 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 patterns, that Lipset and Marks make an important contribution to a discussion that has been marred by overgeneralizations on one side of the political spectrum of bitterness and self-delusion on the other.