American Socialism, Revisited

Posted on February 13, 2019 by Paul Buhle

Paul Buhle reviews *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History*, by Jack Ross (2015)

The history of Socialism in the United States looks different now, must look different, from the ways it did only a few years ago when the subject was off the table and out of sight, a mere blip in some nearly forgotten past. The sudden spurt of growth in the Democratic Socialists of America, considerably less than ten thousand members to more than fifty thousand, has in various ways put socialism on the map. Now, Congresspeople! Especially a certain vivacious, charismatic and brainy 29 year old who seems in her charisma to have succeeded Rose Pastor Stokes, the socialist goddess of the 1910s-20s. Not to mention election successes in lesser offices. And there is Bernie, still the single most popular politician in the US. No wonder magazine articles pro and con on socialism and socialist ideas can be found in places as unlikely as *Vogue*. No wonder books about socialism, discussing and debating socialism, now seem to be appearing in flocks. Even socialistic comics.

The First Wave of Socialist Party histories

There is, between scholar and reader, nevertheless a certain disjuncture. Almost sixty years ago, when I began pursuing the subject, all the books could fit on a single shelf. The best-written were biographies or memoirs of one kind and another, like *If You Don't Weaken*, by the once-famed Oklahoma socialist editor-agitator Oscar Ameringer, or the heart-felt *Bending Cross* by Ray Ginger, the saga of Eugene Debs. The formal histories of parties seemed mostly devoted to point-scoring, either Communist or antiCommunist, and we later learned, to no great surprise. that the academic "Communism in America" series with a truly notable volume or two, especially Theodore Draper's *Roots of American Communism*, had actually been sponsored by the CIA via the Ford Foundation.

The Sixties Revival

The scholarship of the next thirty years or so came out of the social struggles of the 1960s in one way or another, and bore the marks both of commitment and of heavy-duty research. Young intellectuals, inspired by figures like E.P.Thompson, Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery, set themselves upon going through archives, reading newspapers on microfilm and sometimes interviewing oldtimers still around and eager to recount their lives.

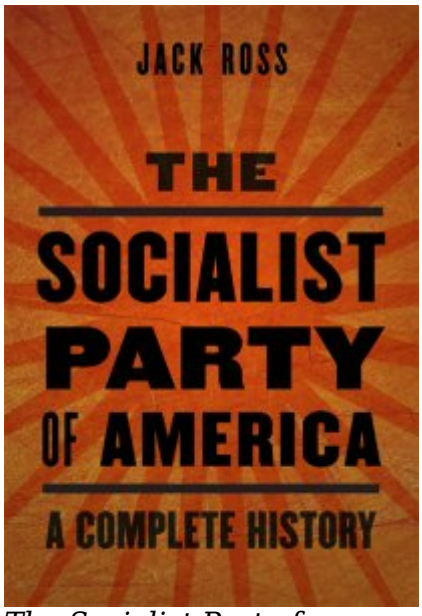
So arose a body of work, dozens or perhaps hundreds of volumes of social history, not to mention hundreds of journal articles, the stories of local socialists and communists, famed or easily forgotten in their own time, the stories of left-learning unions and their leaders and members, the stories of forgotten heroines as well as heroes.

There remained and remains a certain gap. Only a small portion of this work grew out of non-English language sources, given that the working class majorities of Left movements from the 1870s-1930s most often used English as a second language and relied upon their own patois for comradeship and a degree of protection. Still, German, Slav, Italian and Finnish, even Japanese and Chinese immigrant radical had their own scholars working diligently to reveal the hitherto unrevealed.

Aging liberal scholars of the 1970s-90s, feeling the dynamic fields of history had been stolen away from them, complained bitterly that "specialized" had overtaken the work of "generalists" who wrote more successfully for larger publics. They weren't entirely wrong, but it was also true that faithfully anti-radical scholars and books would get the large advances and New York Times reviews that generalists from the Left (with a few exceptions, like Howard Zinn and Eric Foner) mostly did not get.

Offering Up the Nitty-Gritty Details

Thus it happened that a generalist, outside the academic mainstream, would attempt in one 700 page volume *The Socialist Party of America: a Complete History*. The subtitle is unfortunate, but Jack Ross's work, not much noticed at its 2015 appearance, itself acquires a new significance.



The Socialist Part of America: A Complete History, by Jack Ross

In search of what we might call a narrowly political history, Ross offers election details, inner-party conflicts, and the author's own theories of why the socialist movement achieved such limited success. This approach is adequate for filling nearly seven hundred pages of text to prove his points, even if it lacks so much. To take a case in point: the relative stability of socialist and later communist support rested firmly upon the rich fraternal and cultural activities that gave local lefties strong links to their communities and unions. Jewish organizations alone merit attention in these pages, but even here, the standard sources of generations ago have been replaced—but not for Ross. He seems to be a devotee of the forgotten Morris Hillquit, moderate socialist leader, sometime candidate for office in New York, and in the Jewish left world an "assimilationist" who left Yiddish and Yiddshkayt behind, and did not live long enough to be forced into the Democratic party of FDR.

Never mind the limitations. A history with so very many pages of political details, elections, voting totals of losers as well as winners state by state, party membership totals and so on,

as well as a great deal of material on the infighting of socialist versus socialist, has a lot to offer. His faith in the socialist traditions set early in the twentieth century offers a sturdy critique of Left capitulation to the Democratic Party even if, as many of us now believe, FDR and the Second New Deal happened to be an offer that could not be refused, WPA to CIO to Social Security, not to mention (an inconsistent) anti-fascism and (more inconsistent) Good Neighbor Policy toward countries South of the Border. Likewise, Ross's anticommunism is vivid and to many of us social historians, quite excessive—but his critique of Cold War liberalism is sound and occasionally splendid.

A Provocative Theory About the American Left

In fact, his critique of Cold War liberalism leads to a unique, provocative theory about the American Left at large, a theory so remarkable that even being doubtful does not detract greatly from its usefulness. To be brief: Leninism became the strategy of the anti-communists! Ross does not mean "Leninism" in the usual sense of a communist-proletarian party challenging capitalism for power, but rather, Leninism as a theory of infiltration by secret or not-quite-secret bloc of disciplined activists.

This might actually serve as a critique of Trotskyism at large, or at least several Trotskyist strands: faced with the badly outnumbered disciples, leaders elect to infiltrate some larger left movement, take it over and/or leave a smoking wreck behind. But Ross has something else, a larger theory, in mind. For him, the history of the American Left after 1930 or so became a history of left-wingers seeking to take over the labor movement (hardly ever revolutionary) and the Democratic Party (definitely never revolutionary). Ross believes in socialists running in elections as socialists, not Democrats, and his work is, in a sense, an extended mourning at the abandonment of that project.

The story of the SP's rise and fall, from the early twentieth century to the middle of the 1930s, has been written elsewhere. He has little to say about the rich background in the 19th century, not much to say about the cultural uniqueness of Debsian socialism, and not much new to say about the decline of the SP into the 1920s-40s. Readers familiar with these areas will be refreshed by his detailing, however.

It is Ross's version of the post 1950 decades that remain unmatched, in part because so little has been written. Few socialists indeed, by this time, were still being elected locally, even in the hold-out zones of Pennsylvania and Wisconsin where sone German localities had kept faith in the cause. Norman Thomas, "the conscience of America," seemed larger than the rest of the movement together. Furious arguments over the causes of defeat and disappointment, factional conflicts of old and new kinds, occupied the several thousand

members of what became, with a merger, the Socialist Party/Social Democratic Federation.

The live wire in this combination was added by the followers of Max Shachtman, veteran Trotskyist who had led his troops into the Socialist Party in 1937, on an infiltration-and-recruitment drive, and led them outside again after collective expulsion. And it was Max Shachtman, furious supporter of the US invasion of Vietnam, who led one section of these recruits off in a new and unique: super hawks devoted to leading the labor movement, and to the various causes dear to Israel.

No one before Jack Ross has treated this subject so carefully, keeping so close attention to the historical points when, for instance, leaders of the new Social Democrats USA turned their fury upon the "New Politics" of college towns like Burlington, Maine, Madison, Wisconsin. Antiwar, ecological, all the more maddening to Shachtman's troops so because the emerging progressives successfully recruited municipal and state unions to their cause, they had stolen the thunder of socialism.

To some historians of the same zones, the entrance of SDUSA operatives into the Reagan administration through the new National Endowment for Freedom and the polemical assaults on "extreme" environmentalism marked a new, strange phase, a sort of socialism-in-reverse. Armed capitalism, American capitalism, became the global engine of freedom, the Israeli state the pole star and ultimate determinant of policies.

This is the vital core of originality in *The Socialist Party of America*. Ross devotes some forty vital pages to a subject that, in an array of particulars, he knows better than anyone else. He starts the story wisely back in the 1950s, with origins going several generations back further. Jewish socialists of the 1910s-20s, grown old by Cold War years, had for the most part fought off two deviations or what they saw as diversions from the socialist cause: on the one side Yiddishkayt, the definition of socialist activity by way of its origins and the Ashkenazic centuries in Europe, carried over into a wide array of American Jewish institutions; and Zionism, ever present but until the Holocaust most definitely a minor attraction to the great majority of Jewish Americans. Most Yiddish speakers were wiped out by the Holocaust and assimilation was taking care of the rest. Israel, however, offered something compelling in new ways.

The Suez Crisis of the 1956 brought matters, sentiments, to a head. With the Israel seizure of the Sinai Peninsula, precipitating an announcement that this was to be a permanent occupation Israeli archeology, suddenly appeared (just as it would later in the West Bank), with spurious claims upon the land as inherently Jewish, etc. Eisenhower warned the invaders that if they did not return to their proper borders, all US aid to Israel would end.

They returned. Back in the US, a howl went up along with the most furious Islamophobia in decades, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr to Jewish socialists of a certain kind. British Labour leader Hugh Gaitskill, scheduled to speak at the SP convention, cancelled after warnings of protests. Norman Thomas' letter of explanation of his own basically non-Zionist views on the crisis was refused publication in the *Daily Forward* (*Forverts*) by longtime socialist editor and sometime historian Hillel Rogoff. Here, Ross suggests, the political drift hastened. Former Thomas protege Emmanuel Muravchik, appointed to lead the Jewish Labor Committee, would choreograph the Meany regime's sharp rightward turn on the Middle East and other subjects, working (it was often rumored) with intelligence agencies, as likely Israeli as American.

The Socialist Party in the Vietnam Era

Ross does not go far into the implications of the *Ramparts* magazine revelations of 1967, revealing global labor projects as well as intellectual and cultural activity had been carefully sponsored and monitored for almost twenty years. George Meany's CIA handler, going public, insisted that if Meany had let his European partners in on the secret, he would have been discredited. More recent evidence of European labor leaders guidance through the very acceptance NATO suggests more likely that they had no doubt but did not wish to embarrass themselves. Meany himself was nevertheless outraged at the revelation, and in denial: the AFL did not take any money, carefully avoiding an admission that its goal policy arms had been innocent. Perhaps no one, not even socialists on the scene, wished to make much of these revelations. Victor Reuther, himself a less extreme liberal cold warrior, evidently pushed the issue to rub Meany's face in the wash of corruption.

More crucially, Ross does not quite capture the role of the Vietnam War in the precipitation of the new stage of Shachtmanism, this time directed principally against the antiwar movement. By 1968 or so, it became clear that the majority of the American Jewish community, especially young people, opposed continuation of the War. Jewish officialdom, synagogue to bodies and bureaus of various kinds, firmly supported prosecution of the war, in part from Cold War instincts, also from the sense that Israeli leaders and the Israeli public had become wildly hawkish on Vietnam.

For those of us doing work on campuses, the AFL program "Negotiations Now" was no more than a dodge, against the supposed threat of the US pullout. We wanted the return of our high school classmates from death's door, not to mention from the door to endless atrocities against civilians. Ross suggests that Norman Thomas, not much longer for the world, turned against the War as Shachtman's followers embraced it. Irwin Suall, executive secretary of the SP, changed jobs: he would now head a super-hawkish Anti-Defamation League, at the

rightward edge of Jewish liberal institutions. Suall had chosen an ambitious ADL staffer, Carl Gershman, to take over a flagging YPSL, which joined Youth Committee for Peace in the Middle East to present Zionist arguments against "isolationism," i.e, the withdrawal from beleaguered Vietnam.

New America, the tabloid reduced to bi-monthly publication now moving Right, repurposed its identifying subtitle "a social democratic newspaper in the tradition of Norman Thomas and A. Phillip Randolph," choosing "social democratic" in place of "socialist." In November, 1970, the SP and the "Democratic Socialist Federation" (a paper entity with leadership but no members) jointly conducted a "Rally for Israel." An Israeli official, joined by Carl Gershman and Bayard Rustin, headlined the event and suggested where things were going: a drive to finalize a new kind of movement, ferociously hostile toward the new left-liberalism, dubbed the engine of the "new class," middle class radicals taking over city governments in many college towns.

Henry "Scoop" Jackson, bitter critic of Eisenhower as "soft on communism" but best known as the "Senator from Boeing," because of his relentless lobbying for larger arms budgets, became in this crowd almost a substitute for Norman Thomas. A failure as a public speaker and no likely viable presidential candidate, Jackson was nevertheless the hawk that the rightward-leaning socialists welcomed as the antidote to the despised George McGovern. Shachtman himself, in his last months, assaulted McGovern as worse than Henry Wallace! He died just days before Nixon's overwhelming election.

Cold War hardliners on the road to the Project for A New American Century

But something far beyond the normal scope of socialist politics was also underway. Penn Kemble set up the "Coalition for a Democratic Majority," (CDM) aided by Ben Wattenberg and Midge Decter (an anti-feminist propagandist married to Norman Podhoretz). Advisors included Jeane Kirkpatrick, S.M. Lipset and Daniel Bell among others, along with advisors to the late Humphrey and Jackson campaigns. A month later, the SP/SDF became official and by all historical calculations, the Socialist Party of Debs and Thomas became an isolated sect. The SP/SDF had already begun to put into place the alliances that would carry it into the welcoming arms of Ronald Reagan a decade later. Plum jobs, the usual method of placing allies, offered the most likely strategy.

Ross looks upon the CDM, as it would be known, as a Shachtmanite front group, but perhaps it would be better seen as a convenient coalition. On hand at its founding convention were men in high places: Scoop Jackson, Hubert Humphrey, Lane Kirkland,

COPE director Al Barkan, Washington congressman Tom Foley, soon to be Speaker of the House, Jeane Kirkpatrick and John Roche, a former socialist editor who was to become a prominent columnist in the *National Review*. Kemble and Muravchik ran the group.

Simultaneously, David Selden, a peacenik at the presidency of the AFT, was replaced by a severe hawknik, Albert Shanker, creating a host of well-paid positions for the emerging movement. Rachelle Horowitz became the new political director, Sandra Feldman (sister to Paul Feldman, new editor of *New America*) the new UFT president. SDUSA increasingly took shape under another fallen or perhaps rising star: when Jay Lovestone, head of the AFL's global intelligence apparatus, retired, his place was taken by Irving Brown, a longtime spook with little labor background but at death, a special honorary ceremony with medals presented posthumously by the CIA itself, according to his sympathetic biographer. Tom Kahn became Brown's assistant, although some said Kahn's chief role was mainly domestic and peculiar: to provide intelligence on left-wing activists or reformers who might threaten the leadership of the labor movement.

Scoop Jackson remained a central figure, not only for his own activity but because his office became a hatching center or newly prominent hawks. Richard Perle, destined for the Iran Contra job and beyond that, a propagandist for Iraq's imaginary WMDs, was now Jackson's chief of staff. Elliot Abrams, Perle's colleague in these two operations but also designated to become Norman Podhoretz's son in law, climbed upward by going to work for Jackson. From that office, Carl Gershman now attacked the ill-fated Richard Nixon for his reputed impulses toward Detente. The publicity machine lifted high Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a policy advisor for the same Nixon, demanding the US get tougher in the world. Moynihan thus earned appointment as ambassador to the UN, where he cursed the rising independent nations of the Global South and made clear his support for the South African "Apartheid" regime. He was tough enough to be adopted by hawkish Democrats in a Senate bid, over peacenik Bella Abzug, in 1976. Here, he would be even more useful in putting forward SDUSA positions as a Solon.

The 1976 SDUSA convention, as Ross explains, hailed Moynihan, Shanker and John Roche as featured speakers, each more hawkish than the other. At the climax of the event or after, lifetime awards were given to David Dubinsky and A. Philip Randolph. Later that year, Kemble and Muravchik headed up a last effort to grab the Democratic nomination for their beloved boss, Scoop Jackson, who went down as Moynihan went up, taking Kemble and Abrams with him. Irving Kristol, an old friend, recruited new blood for a sagging business lobby, the American Enterprise Institute, offering sumptuous staff salaries to the now-familiar stock of ex-socialists including Max Kampelman, Jean Kirkpatrick, and Josh Muravchik, loyal and prosperous son of Emanuel. It paid to move rightward. Freedom

House, nominally non-partisan in its human rights activity and research, increasingly operated in this vicinity, with new hirings and a new ferocity in deciding which regimes (unfriendly to the US) were repressive and which were not all that repressive (friends with the US, but especially with Israel).

The new ideological tone shocked some familiar friends and excited others. By the late 1970s, Podhoretz was warning that American culture had been feminized into appeasement by the homosexual likes of James Baldwin and Gore Vidal. With this inspiration perhaps, the CDM became the Committee on the Present Danger, turning their rage upon president Jimmy Carter. Donald Rumsfeld, Gerald Ford's secretary of defense, eagerly joined the hawk crowd, destined for greater things, the Iraq Invasion and George W. Bush's right hand man. Jimmy Carter meanwhile became the whipping boy of the moment, guilty of seeking actual negotiations between Israel and the PLO. When Andrew Young's meeting with PLO reps prompted his expulsion from the White House, the ex-socialists exalted: they had won. Their hopes that Moynihan would actually run for president in 1980 fell to lack of (his) will, or perhaps to the bottle, because the Irishman had been pouring down the booze since his days with Michael Harrington in the White Horse, and it showed.

They found something better. Ross's story telling reaches a high point here, because in his acute view, the jobs at the Reagan White House signaled the end of SDUSA's usefulness, even as the East Bloc shuddered on the way down. In the short run, it looked awfully good. Tom Kahn argued, in the weeks after the 1980 election, that the choice of the US public had not been for a conservative, but rather against a weak-on-defense Carter, who had somehow and despite the Carter Doctrine for the Middle East, been a McGovern liberal after all. Midge Decter formed yet another heavily funded hawkish entity, the Committee for a Free World, drawing in Rumfeld and Irving Kristol, also Bayard Rustin, Martin Peretz, and even Elie Wiesel. Joining the Reagan administration with plummier plum jobs, SDUSA veterans Linda Chavez (who claimed she had turned the AFT's own magazine into a fine conservative journal) and Max Green no doubt welcomed yet another heavily funded front group, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, reaching out to Born Again Protestants and conservative Catholic officials in hopeful expectation of Central American counter revolutions.

Iran-Contra, the sub rosa operation to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, proved to be the first and for a long time the most important project of the new National Endowment for Democracy, established in 1983. Carl Gershman, president for life of a new and sumptuous bureaucracy destined to survive even the end of the Cold War, had a personal triumph. This success made a challenge to Reagan by Walter Mondale, in 1984, seem almost irrelevant. Hawkish protege of Hubert Humphrey, Mondale gained no traction,

even within the labor movement. Following his ignominious defeat, the CDM did not quite reorganize, in a few years, as the Democratic Leadership Council, but the DLC was its heir apparent. Still, as Ross notes, the CDM maintained an afterlife thanks to a conservative heiress whose favorite charities were anti-muslim ideologues.

Ross points to an enraged letter to the *New York Times*, by Max Kampelman, Bayard Rustin and Emmanual Muravchik, attacking the Nuclear Freeze Movement for recalling the name of Norman Thomas, as a veritable prince of peace: how dare they! He also points to a few embarrassing slips of strategy, not only Abrams near the center of the Iran Contra conspiracy, but Irwin Suall's negotiations with the South African government against its freedom-seeking black opponents—an extension of the Israelis' notorious security alliance. The 1985 SDUSA convention, altogether understandably, featured a leader of the Contras receiving the very cash of Iran-Contra. Worse, Bayard Rustin, a few years before his 1987 death, had offered himself as character witness to Ariel Sharon, the war criminal of the 1982 Israeli rack-and-rape of Lebanon, suing *Time* magazine for documenting his crimes. Ross aptly likens this curious embrace of Israel's extreme right to aging Sam Gompers' embrace of Mussolini fifty years earlier.

In the end, what remained of SDUSA closed its office in the ILGWU building in New York and relocated to AFL headquarters, the Meany Center, where unionists of the global South were "trained" by intelligence experts, behind locked doors. Even this SDUSA office closed in 2001, perhaps fittingly for the new century, almost as that new entity, the Project for a New Century, urged George W. Bush to carry out the Iraq invasion. It was, finally, Vietnam all over again, a grand scheme destined for failure. But not in the very short run: at a festive celebration of the NED's twentieth anniversary, no less than President Bush delivered a speech no doubt written for him by the proteges of SDUSA, hailing the ongoing war as a grand crusade for democracy across the whole middle east bound to succeed in its military-missionary mission.

Ross is keen to point to some high points in all this. The rise of Polish Solidarity seemed to vindicate the Cold War crusade, except that the politics of Poland afterward disappointed, not to mention the shutdown of the plants where the workers' actions had taken place. Poland was liberation from the East Bloc, for an increasingly nationalist future. Young Poles, liberated from East Bloc rules, could travel abroad for better jobs: that was the main benefit. Meanwhile, an increasingly intolerant government kept moving rightward at home.

In short, one can see this trajectory as victory or as a shift of erstwhile socialist into regressive versions of capitalism and, yes, imperialism. The crises of global warming and ecological catastrophism, not to mention the return of regressive nationalism, do not offer

an easily cheerful conclusion.

Nor does *The Socialist Party: a Complete History*, have much of a conclusion. The last fifty pages of the book, more or less, cover DSA and the activities around the shriveled Socialist Party remanent, often merged or semi-merged with other third party efforts. Ross is very much against socialists placing their faith or their efforts within the Democratic Party, so he might indeed have no more to say now, if he had waited a few years to finish the book.

Again, Never Mind. It's a book with lots of information, a minimal amount of it factually doubtful, and besides, thirty pages of Appendices on the national officers of the SP, elected officeholders and presidential vote totals. It is nice to see this in one place.

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