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Nick Salvatore

Cornell University, nas4@cornell.edu

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Response to Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920"

Abstract

[Excerpt] Wilentz's critique of the exceptionalist theme in American historiography is to the point. Whether one applauded the absence of feudalism, and therefore class conflict, in America with the historians of the 1950s or bemoaned that liberal democratic tradition as the "nail in the coffin of class consciousness" in the 1970s, either interpretative structure sacrifices empirical evidence for grand theory. In the former, the careers of Thomas Skidmore or Ira Stewart are all but incomprehensible; in the latter, men like Joseph R. Buchanan or Eugene V. Debs have little relevance. More importantly, the actual experience of the majority of American working people is either lost or misunderstood. For as Wilentz sharply delineates, the fact that American workers did not largely espouse an a priori notion of class did not mean that they either embraced the ideology of their employers or were defenseless, in the political culture, when confronted by the demands of those same employers on the shop floor. In exploring the continued power of America's democratic revolutionary heritage for working people in the generations following 1776, Wilentz emphasizes a central concern of many workers that, the evidence would suggest, structured much of their response to industrial capitalism.

Keywords

labor movement, exceptionalism, class, liberalism, politics, capitalism

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Comments

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**Response to Sean Wilentz,
"Against Exceptionalism: Class
Consciousness and the American
Labor Movement, 1790-1920"**

Nick Salvatore

New York State School of
Industrial and Labor Relations,
Cornell University

Sean Wilentz's essay is an interesting mixture of historical mosaic, theoretical critique, and prophetic advocacy. As such it is a mixed piece, offering in turn a clarifying insight and a sweep so broad as to raise fundamental doubts concerning its basic analysis. The call for a new synthesis is by no means novel, but it remains unclear that Wilentz has re-ordered the discussion with this effort. Indeed, I finished the essay somewhat bemused at the continued relevance of such thinkers as Alexis de Tocqueville and even the oft-criticized Louis Hartz for American labor historiography.

Wilentz's critique of the exceptionalist theme in American historiography is to the point. Whether one applauded the absence of feudalism, and therefore class conflict, in America with the historians of the 1950s or bemoaned that liberal democratic tradition as the "nail in the coffin of class consciousness" in the 1970s,¹ either interpretative structure sacrifices empirical evidence for grand theory. In the former, the careers of Thomas Skidmore or Ira Stewart are all but incomprehensible; in the latter, men like Joseph R. Buchanan or Eugene V. Debs have little relevance. More importantly, the actual experience of the majority of American working people is either lost or misunderstood. For as Wilentz sharply delineates, the fact that American workers did not largely espouse an *a priori* notion of class did not mean that they either embraced the ideology of their employers or were defenseless, in the political culture, when confronted by the demands of those same employers on the shop floor. In exploring the continued power of America's democratic revolutionary heritage for working people in the generations following 1776, Wilentz emphasizes a central concern of many workers that, the evidence would suggest, structured much of their response to industrial capitalism.

But perhaps Wilentz has gone too far in his search for a comprehensive interpretation. To study the "political history of exchange and property relations" within the context of America's democratic tradition is important and can, as

Wilentz suggests, help clarify both empirical and theoretical questions of importance. But to achieve that goal it seems important to use carefully three related but quite different terms: class consciousness, class conflict and class formation. One does not have to be an exceptionalist (of any variety) to note that a society can witness class formation, experience at times severe class conflict and yet rarely find even moments in its history when a consistent and coherent consciousness of those "objective" conditions informed the public actions and expressed ideology of working people. In equating the political history of exchange and property relations with class consciousness, and in failing to explore those distinctions noted above, Wilentz misinterprets evidence and ultimately begs the central question. For it is actions combined with intent and motivation that gives meaning to the term class consciousness.

Take the example of the bakers in New York City in 1801, whom Wilentz presents as "already battling hard to free themselves from mercantile market controls . . . [and] to ward off the rise of new capitalist enterprises." Fair enough as far as it goes but, as Howard Rock has noted, this interpretation is only part of the story. The bakers' original protest derived from their opposition to the assize on bread, the system through which the city authorities regulated the profit allowable on the majority of New Yorkers' basic staple. In that protest, Rock demonstrates, the bakers themselves aggressively advocated a free enterprise ideology to justify the lifting of state controls which were originally established for the common good and to protect the community from individual avarice.² The point is not that Wilentz is wrong in noting the anti-elitist theme in the bakers' later protest. Rather, in ignoring the original expressed motivation of their protest, he claims too much for the power and influence of that democratic (and, one infers, radical) tradition.

A similar objection arises from Wilentz's treatment of late nineteenth and early twentieth century labor history. While it is inspiring to read Joseph P. McDonnell's critique of capitalist wage relations, the broader context of his career in the 1870s might suggest the need for a more cautious interpretation. McDonnell, a Marxist and former personal secretary to Karl Marx, stressed the need for the economic rather than political organization of the working class. Like Jonathan Fincher a decade earlier, McDonnell remained suspicious of even independent working-class political activity precisely because of the low level of class awareness he observed among American workers. To enter the political arena in that state, McDonnell argued, without a broadly recognized, specifically working-class definition of America's democratic political tradition, would be folly. As he argued in 1878, when opposing those in the Cigar Makers International Union who would involve the union in politics, "Our capitalist enemy resides in the breast of almost everyone" in America.³ One may read McDonnell's statement as an example of an early "left exceptionalist," if the focus is purely on the theoretical implications. But if one also recalls that McDonnell was actively attempting to organize workers into unions, and encountering a persistent reluctance from them, the descriptive power of his comment might cause a certain hesitation.

Although brief, Wilentz's treatment of Samuel Gompers is also problematic. To argue that Gompers's notion of Americanism was simply the equivalent of that

nineteenth century “notion of right that was denied by most employers” is to seriously misread the history. It is perhaps true, as Socialist leader Morris Hillquit once stated, that Gompers was “the most class-conscious man” of his era.⁴ But it is equally true that Gompers consciously utilized that concept of Americanism in a highly conservative (if not xenophobic) fashion to distance himself personally and politically from both native and foreign-born workers who rejected his methods or his institution. Not insignificantly, his repeated use of that concept also sought to win approval from his erstwhile corporate allies in the National Civic Federation. If they attacked his Federation, Gompers noted numerous times, the corporations would then be forced to confront more radical workers “who will not have the American idea.”⁵

Finally, the tone of Wilentz’s discussion of labor’s “three divergent strategies” to meet the difficulties of early twentieth century American society is misleading. As description his account presents few problems, since the American Federation of Labor, the Socialist Party, and the Industrial Workers of the World did indeed represent three potential alternatives to the fierce attack by employers on working people. But Wilentz infers more than just description, implying that these alternatives occupied a central place among workers at the time. This assumption presents some serious problems. In 1912, the AFL reported over 1.7 million members; the Socialist Party had approximately 118,000 (with possibly as many as 50–60% in working class occupations); while the Industrial Workers of the World reported, in its haphazard way, approximately 18,000 dues-paying members. Allowing for the most generous accounting measures, the combined figure of 1.8 million represents less than 8 percent of the 1910 labor force of 23.1 million.⁶ It is not that Wilentz is wrong in claiming that many in these organizations advocated a militant brand of Americanism that conflicted sharply with that offered by their employers. Rather, his presentation gives us no context to understand the majority of workers who never joined these organizations, who remained wedded to one of the two major political parties and who would, some few years later, freely march off to “Save the World for Democracy.”

Sean Wilentz’s emphasis on the continuity in thought among American workers, a continuity structured by adherence to republican values and a democratic political tradition, is an argument that I am more than sympathetic toward, as my own work on Eugene Debs might suggest. But Wilentz, in the essay at hand, claims far too much for that belief. Even Debs came to realize that workers could and did utilize the central concepts of *his* public identity—the presentation of his agitation as the result of his dual identity as citizen and workingman—to urge A. Mitchell Palmer to refuse clemency for the imprisoned Socialist leader: “I am a working man and a citizen,” Ralph C. Reed wrote Palmer in 1919, “and believe that Debs should get what is coming to him.”⁷ Reed’s understanding was by no means an isolated phenomenon among the workers Wilentz discusses, and the absence of discussion of it undermines this essay’s effectiveness.

There is, I think, a more fundamental difficulty with Wilentz’s interpretation as well. Even if we accept the argument at face value, forgetting for the moment the types of empirical difficulties I have noted, it is not at all clear that we are left with a

substantively new theoretical perspective. Wilentz sharply distances himself from those who would search for a more orthodox Marxism in America. But it is less clear that he has travelled as far as he would wish from the position outlined by Louis Hartz and others. A follower of Gramsci, for example, could interpret Wilentz's essay as a classic example of hegemony, that the constant repetition of class demands using a traditional political vocabulary indicates the parameters of allowable dissent in capitalist culture. I think Wilentz would reject this approach (correctly by my lights) as a serious misreading of the evidence. Yet the point remains that, even for the most class aware democratic workers, theirs was in large part a struggle within the accepted political structure to define the *meaning* of such traditional concepts as citizenship and democracy. When one pushes beyond their varied protests to explore the nature of the transformation advocated, one finds, more often than not, that the ultimate motivation was to return to the political and economic conditions that more accurately reflected their understanding of America's tradition and promise. In short, employers are seen as the revolutionaries in society for the way in which their control over resources and the shop floor forced drastic changes in workers' family life, community position, and even sense of self. To appreciate the very real class element in this debate is important, even though the debate was neither limited to, nor included, all workers. But to ignore the expressed goal of the majority, in favor of an appeal to "a broader historical context" to determine the meaning of the protest, is questionable.

In private discussion and in published writings over the past twenty years many of us, in this generation of historians now emerging in the universities, have taken our shots at Hartz and "his" liberal tradition. That regal practitioner of the tradition, Daniel Boorstein, had rightly been too tempting a target to resist; and Hartz himself, in his less judicious moments, has almost invited criticism. One can read *The Liberal Tradition in America*, for example, and completely miss the profoundly divisive nature of the slave system and the Civil War in American history. Similarly, the book's analysis of America's transition to industrial and then corporate capitalism, including its treatment of working people, is woefully inadequate and uninformed. Hartz's epigrammatic summation of the corporation's role in American life is a classic example of an all-too frequent approach in the book: allowing trusts to emerge without significant legal restraint "soothed nerves at the top," he noted, while it "shattered them at the bottom, since the chance of rising in the American world was inhibited by it. But that is another story."⁸ It is precisely that "story," of course, that requires inclusion before one can discuss with authority any tradition in America. In addition to Hartz's own excesses, the political and social context surrounding the book's publication created what Max Weber might have called an ideological "iron cage": consensus was enthroned; dissent deemed un-American; and the working class declared extinct. Given the emergence of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements in the 1960s, it is not surprising that Hartz and the consensus historians in general came under sustained attack by activists and scholars alike.

But it is not at all clear to me that Louis Hartz was totally in error. When one considers Hartz's theme through the prism of Tocqueville, at least two important

points become clearer. First, critics cannot personalize this perception and thus easily dismiss it as the excess of either one thinker (i.e., Hartz) or of a group now held to be severely limited by their historical context (i.e., the "counter-Progressive historians"). For as a rereading of Tocqueville suggests, a broadly conceived consensus on central issues has played a critical role in American society. Furthermore, as Tocqueville noted in the 1830s, and as Michael Rogin has more recently reminded us again, the existence of this consensus neither eliminated conflict nor fostered a flat, one-dimensional ideological vision.⁹ Fierce debate and discussion, coupled with intense and frequently violent class conflict, did indeed mark much of the nineteenth century worker's experience. But only rarely did that experience produce a conscious and sustained self-image of working people as a class standing in opposition to other classes in society; even more rarely was that consciousness passed on from one generation of workers to another. To note the reality of a limited social mobility for a portion of the working class, or to comment on the widely-shared political identity (among white males) to understand this does not necessarily make one an exceptionalist of the post-World War II genre. Rather it can point to the historical fact that, between workers and employers and *within* the working class itself, each generation sought once again to define the meaning of America's revolutionary democratic tradition to fit their specific circumstances. But as the Ralph Reeds among American workers should remind us, even within the working class there was anything but unanimity on that definition.

In short then, it remains unclear to me how the substitution of a militant Americanism for an orthodox Marxism or a celebratory liberalism leads us to a new historical synthesis. For as developed in this brief essay, the outline of that proposed synthesis leaves little room for understanding the very real ambiguity at the core of the nineteenth century working class experience. That many workers opposed capitalism as they experienced it should be evident to anyone who has ever read a labor paper or interviews with nineteenth century workers. But that this opposition, profoundly rooted in America's democratic and religious traditions, became a self-conscious and self-sustaining oppositional ideology is an argument I find little support for in the historical evidence. As the careers of Eugene V. Debs and Martin Luther King suggest, that opposition has been a theme of great importance in broadening the concept of democratic citizenship to include critiques of economic and racial oppression. But the social historian, if not necessarily the prophet, in each of us need recognize that it has been a theme, and frequently not even a dominant one, among American working people.

NOTES

1. The phrase is Alan Dawley's in *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976). As Wilentz suggests, this approach is by no means limited to Dawley.
2. Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the*

Age of Jefferson (New York, 1979), 183-197. For an early yet central statement of this corporatist philosophy, complete with a theological defense of class distinctions, see John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in Perry Miller and Thomas A. Johnson (ed.), *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings* (New York, 1963), 195-99.

3. Quoted in Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the AFL* (Westport, Ct., 1973), 86; on Fincher, see John R. Commons, et al., *History of Labour in the United States* (New York, 1918, 2 vols.), II, 93-94.

4. Quoted in Louis S. Reed, *The Labor Philosophy of Samuel Gompers* (New York, 1930), 57.

5. For a fuller discussion of this theme, see my introduction to the abridged edition of Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984, forthcoming).

6. See Philip Taft, *The A. F. of L. in the Time of Gompers* (New York, 1957), 233; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1982), 221; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (Chicago, 1969), 263. For labor force figures (including agricultural workers), see Andrew Dawson, "The Paradox of Dynamic Technological Change and the Labor Aristocracy in the United States, 1880-1914," *Labor History* 20 (Summer 1979), 328.

7. Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs*, 302.

8. Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955), 222.

9. Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Mas., 1967), ch. two.