

Laura Blessing  
University of Virginia  
Paper Presentation

**Race Cards Trump Labor Cards:**  
How Racial Politics Prevented the Growth of Socialism in the United States

American exceptionalism is a topic of inquiry scholars have puzzled over ever since the eminently quotable de Tocqueville coined the term. Specifically, the question of why the United States, unlike its Western industrialized counterparts, has never had a socialist government or successful socialist party has been a major question for American Political Development scholars as well as others in complementary fields. Yet perhaps the answer lies partly in the framing of the issue itself. What if instead of seeking a cause for the exceptional we were called to explain the *peculiar*? The tides and trends of academia would probably have developed mostly unchanged. Consensus historians would be accused of wrapping themselves in the flag or even with blindfolding themselves with it—and so forth. But we would be called upon to account for the most jarring of our institutions—slavery—and its effect on our development. Unlike many theorists who seek to explain our aversion to socialism with overarching trends, the constraints of different eras is discussed here. Different periods of race relations during a time that elsewhere was a formative socialist period, as well as the political structure that resulted from such conflict, is of paramount importance. One can make a case for earlier and later periods where race was not the deciding factor. (The quasi-socialist government investment of the colonial period and, later, FDR’s strategic co-opting of socialists come to mind). But the bulk of the nineteenth century is the most consequential for explaining socialism’s failure. In essence, my argument is two-fold—that racial politics blunted socialist hopes, and that in this context a political party system was born that restrained socialism for both racial and institutional reasons. In order to prove such a claim, the previous explanations must be evaluated, a “what-if” scenario of a nation unmarred by slavery envisioned, the different ways race trumped labor explained, and the resulting political structure’s hostility to socialism described.

Many scholars have puzzled over America's lack of socialism, creating a multitude of theories. These theories generally fall into the categories of American "character" explanations (more equality, less class consciousness, etc.), explanations of events in critical eras (Progressive-era union behavior, etc.), and structural political explanations (our two party system, federalism, etc.). A common element of other explanations is that they are contributing factors, but not major causal ones. In the "American character" category, Louis Hartz's seminal *The Liberal Tradition in America* hits upon one such factor—the absence of feudalism. Certainly, if America did have a feudal past and the likely attendant class-consciousness, the importance of class (and possible historical conflicts around it) would be increased. But, as Seymour Martin Lipset points out, there are other nations without feudal pasts that nonetheless have powerful socialist parties, such as Canada and Australia.<sup>1</sup> The absence of feudalism may contribute to a relative lack of class-consciousness in addition to other factors. But used as a single factor analysis it carries little weight. Another problem with the feudalism thesis is that it requires one to ignore the South.<sup>2</sup> While the South was not precisely feudal, slaves were tied to the land in a similar way as peasants, and the aristocratic culture and relative lack of social mobility should, according to Hartz's theory, render the United States quite susceptible to Socialism.

Related to the absence of feudalism is the multi-faceted charge that the US is philosophically incompatible with socialism. Many cite the existence of greater opportunities

---

<sup>1</sup> Lipset & Marks, p. 59, 79 There is also a thorough comparison of Canada, Australia, and the United States in Lipset's *The First New Nation*.

<sup>2</sup> Hartz is not the only scholar to openly tell readers to ignore the entire South. De Tocqueville, Boorstin, and others also base their conception of American democracy or spirit on not analyzing the South.

and relative affluence to explain this American outlook. It is difficult to resist the temptation to quote Sombart's claim that "all Socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie."<sup>3</sup> Theodore Lowi makes the effective criticism here that Americans did not know that they were relatively better off.<sup>4</sup> De Tocqueville (though not criticizing the thesis that greater finances preempt socialism) observed that Americans' greater position of financial power only empowered them to fight harder for further gains.<sup>5</sup> In short, this is a particularly weak claim. Other elements of our character, our philosophic aversion to socialism include a more egalitarian society, the presence of more class mobility, having a more religious population, being more democratic (with a big focus on early male suffrage) and even showing a temperamental immunity to the pull of dogmatic, exacting philosophies. Some consider the "gift" of early male suffrage as taking away what would have been a socialist rallying point, while inculcating more independently-minded than class-aware voter habits.<sup>6</sup> Daniel Boorstin has put forth the thesis in *The Genius of American Politics* that because all mainstream American politicians are classical liberals, and as such are tone-deaf to the complexities of political dogma or its appeal. He even has dubbed the belief that these unchanging American values are automatically defined "givenness".<sup>7</sup> And Turner's frontier thesis (that the frontier absorbed radical elements that would have boiled over if constrained) also fits squarely in the category of American character. All these, like the absence of feudalism, have undoubtedly contributed to a general paucity of class consciousness. Yet they are not strong enough on their own to withstand socialism, and

---

<sup>3</sup> Lowi, p. 372; Goldfield, p. 26

<sup>4</sup> Lowi, p. 372

<sup>5</sup> De Tocqueville, p. 556. Lipset quotes Merton as making the same claim nearly a century later on p. 227

<sup>6</sup> Lipset & Marks, p. 58

<sup>7</sup> Boorstin, p. 9

appear particularly weak when one looks at different periods of labor agitation or (relative) socialist electoral success. In the face of quite tangible historical tumult, it is impossible to link a waning of intangible philosophic national character to explain such results.

The ideology of business unionism manifests the more competitive elements of our national character, and brings us to our second category of socialism failing because of actions taken in critical eras. The proclivity of unions to exacerbate aggressive (and elitist) distinctions within the working class hurts broader-based movements. Specialized unions that denied membership to the unskilled workers and that often refused political alliances built labor's foundation upon shaky ground. The additional problems of a preference for collaborative bargaining over legislation and the prolonged hostility of different governments to such laws blunted socialist tactics. Seymour Martin Lipset also goes into great detail on the more corporate structure of unions. Not only did the members not collaborate to perform managerial/political tasks, but managers were specially appointed for such jobs alone and paid a considerable amount of money.<sup>8</sup>

Lowi's federalism thesis (that the political structure, particularly its decentralized nature, prevented socialism) feeds into the union-based explanation for socialism's failure. The federalism thesis (along with our two-party presidential system) are the major theories in the third category of structural political explanations. Because unions and socialists had to spend resources on so many political fronts (cities, states, and nationwide) they faced virtually

---

<sup>8</sup> Lipset, p 221. Lipset quotes Gunnar Myrdal here, who notes that observers of American unions are "struck by the importance played by salaried 'organizers' and the relative unimportance of, or often the lack of, a spontaneous drive from the workers themselves." Lipset also notes the significantly greater ratio of managers to members in the United States and their greater prevalence of corruption on p230.

insurmountable (and unaffordable) challenges. Clearly, the business unionism and federalism theses are improvements on the previously discussed ones. But they wait too long in our nation's history to ask more important formative questions. Why did our federal, two-party system evolve as it did to prevent union success? Why didn't either of the two parties develop strong union ties or even become a socialist party?

The formation of the two-party federalist system is even more important than identifying it as an impediment to third party challengers. Explaining why neither party became socialist is the major piece of the puzzle, and racial politics is the clear answer. Whereas this two-part, 19<sup>th</sup> century-centered thesis is unique, explaining labor's failure through race is not. Michael Goldfield argues in his book *The Color of Politics* that race has helped form our party system and has blocked labor successes. But Goldfield goes too far. He claims that "the system of white supremacy has played a central role in all the critical turning points of US politics from colonial times to the present."<sup>9</sup> This is a wildly overarching claim. One can certainly point to examples of racism throughout our nation's history, but to claim this as the major causal factor in politics writ large is extraordinary.<sup>10</sup> There are many instances of a pointed *inattention* to race in our history. Indeed, virtually all politicians avoided discussion on slavery until the 1830s. The Federalists coveted their Southern allies and did not want to alienate them.<sup>11</sup> And there were certainly examples of a distinct lack of white supremacy, the most obvious being the immediate

---

<sup>9</sup> Goldfield, p. 30

<sup>10</sup> Even Goldfield acknowledges his own weaknesses with striking candor. He admits early on, on page 31, that "[i]t is unlikely that any one investigator might have detailed knowledge, even where possible, of all the periods that she or he discusses. I certainly make no such claim and am painfully aware that in certain areas, I may be skimming along on thin ice."

<sup>11</sup> Foner, p. 22

or gradual emancipation of slaves by the Northern states between 1777 and 1804. But here is not the place to delineate every failing of his thesis—it is enough to prove that it must be significantly constrained.

\* \* *Moving towards Causality: Imagining America without Slavery* \* \*

One way to prove the racial politics theory is to ask if socialism would have thrived in its absence. The presence of slavery would then have a stronger link of causality. There are not, admittedly, many good comparative examples to draw from. Australia is perhaps the best choice. Its early history is similar to America's in many ways, with the necessary exception of slavery. Both countries were colonized by the English and forcefully subdued (but did not notably mix with) the local population. Their geographic separation left them quite removed from home rule. When contrasted with Europe, both were relatively politically decentralized, with a federalist system, and sought to settle a comparatively empty frontier.<sup>12</sup> Thus both groups were of a similar political and cultural background, with an English conception of the state, but relatively free to evolve of themselves.

There are great economic similarities as well. King Cotton's counterpart was Australia's wool empire. The Outback (and interior) of Australia and the American South have very similar farming characteristics. In both people gravitated towards plantation systems because of the harsh conditions. In Australia these difficult working conditions and wage-working, communal lifestyle radicalized many workers. There were bitter strikes on sheep-shearing farms, and

---

<sup>12</sup> Lipset, p. 228-230

remarkable solidarity between laborers. Lipset identifies these Australian characteristics (though he only compares them to the Northern American states and the independent farmer culture), and particularly the timing of the emergence of labor parties.<sup>13</sup>

These Australian conditions led to the formation of labor parties before a stable political party system, which was then formed by union interests. The Australian labor party was stridently populist—and racist, too, but without a subservient slave class to attack. Racial purity was prized, but the nomadic aborigines did not underpin the economy.<sup>14</sup> The United States, by contrast, did not only have an enslaved race fueling the southern economy, but the labor parties (and successes) of the 1820s were subsumed by the slavery issue. Before labor could mold our party system, slavery did.

\* \* *The Race Card: Trumping Labor* \* \*

Racial issues would not undermine labor significantly until the 1830s—but the evolution of both as well as their intersection must be noted. Before the 1820s-1830s, slavery was very much an evil not seen, heard, or spoken on the national level. The dodging of this issue and the recognition of its divisiveness was felt by our founders. At the Constitutional Convention, Madison remarked that “the great danger to our general government is the great southern and northern interests of the continent being opposed to each other.”<sup>15</sup> Madison further noted that the main lines of division were drawn according to these regions. Yet much effort by many

---

<sup>13</sup> Lipset & Marks, p. 58-60

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 58-60

<sup>15</sup> Foner, p. 36

distinct groups was expended to avoid confronting slavery. The Constitutional Convention wholly avoided resolving the issue, most notably in the three-fifths compromise and in the promise not to eliminate the slave trade until 1808. And as previously stated (in debunking Goldfield's claims), the Federalist party was invested in its Southern members, and was loathe to address this issue. Philosophically, the Federalists were far from abolitionists anyway—they adhered to an ordered, hierarchical vision of society that was not as conducive to anti-slavery claims.<sup>16</sup> Even later, after the Compromise of 1820, politicians breathed a collective sigh of relief, and went about willfully ignoring slavery once again.<sup>17</sup> But this debate left some with an eerie premonition. John Quincy Adams noted that this conflict “disclosed a secret: it revealed the basis for a new organization of parties...Here was a new party really formed...terrible to the whole Union, but portentously terrible to the South.”<sup>18</sup>

Working-class interests also took time to emerge in force. In colonial America, typical “employer-employee” working relationships did not exist in a modern, industrialized sense.<sup>19</sup> Workers often had a real stake in the possessions of the business, with no single entity being identified as the “owner” or exercising managerial control. Businesses were small and largely based on an apprenticeship system. As such, they were not ripe for union activity. In the 1790s, labor organizations emerged, particularly in cities. But these functioned mainly as philanthropic organizations (working on widows' relief, etc.) and not as unions, only sporadically coming

---

<sup>16</sup> Foner, p. 22-23

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 37

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 37

<sup>19</sup> Dulles & Dubofsky, p. 21

together to agitate for better worker benefits.<sup>20</sup> By the early 1800s, increases in transportation, larger businesses employing more workers and eschewing the apprenticeship system began to shift conditions towards those favorable to union organizing. Seymour Martin Lipset uses an additional explanation for these early years. He notes that the overwhelming investment by state and local governments in public services and the volume of foreign (particularly British) investment were quasi-socialist, thus preempting labor-based parties. He notes that “the doctrine of ‘laissez-faire’ became dominant only after the growth of large corporations and private investment funds reduced the pressures on public funds.”<sup>21</sup> Thus neither labor conducive to organization nor large businesses (benefitting from more extreme laissez-faire policies) to rail against were present.

Before 1820, no unions for factory workers yet existed, though organizations safeguarding positions of skilled workers did exist. After the setback of a severe depression in 1819, the first factory unions emerged in 1822 in the New England textile mills.<sup>22</sup> Associations of unions of different trades also emerged at this time. On a state-wide level, the Workingmen’s parties of the 1820s were able to accomplish much indeed. In five northern states they pressured legislatures to pass ten-hour work day restrictions. In New York they were able to convince the state to “[abolish] imprisonment for debt, [halt] restrictive voter registration regulations, and [weaken] the militia system.”<sup>23</sup> The depression of 1837 and the changing national philosophy to one of individualistic competition (not ordered classes) also helped usher in some labor

---

<sup>20</sup> Dulles & Dubofsky, p. 23

<sup>21</sup> Lipset, p. 59

<sup>22</sup> Dulles & Dubofsky, p. 27-32

<sup>23</sup> Lipset & Marks, p. 67

successes. Certainly, labor organizations were more likely to emerge in the North as the difficulties of industrial life became more pronounced, and as Southern slaves replaced what would otherwise have likely been wage workers.

It is significant to note the lack of industrialization in the South as well as the North's initial labor successes. It is difficult to argue that slavery did not prompt the South to avoid industrializing. Fred Bateman and Thomas Weiss have done considerable work on this question. They found that there was sufficient demand for industrial items, that start-up capital for such ventures was present, and that Southern markets functioned well enough to accommodate such change. Bateman and Weiss thus found that it was overwhelmingly in the best interests of the potential industrialists to begin such businesses, but that the planter class, for reasons that can only be described as psychological or cultural, did not want to make these promising investments. They also note the social practice whereby "industrial mavericks...[were] ostracized".<sup>24</sup> Ashworth notes how skittish these two academics are about linking slavery to these irrational preferences, instead preferring to emphasize a culture opposed to industrial wealth and social change in general. Bateman and Weiss point to the small amount of slaves doing industrial work and the existence of any immigrants in the South (in 1860 the South had 10% of the US's foreign-born) as proof that slavery impeded neither immigration nor industrialization, when such small numbers should suggest that slave labor impeded both. Another author whose work helps illuminate the issue of Southern industrialization is Claudia Goldin. She notes the remarkable hostility of white workers seeking to remove blacks from their market. She also notes the greater opportunities urban slaves had than their rural counterparts,

---

<sup>24</sup> Ashworth, p. 499-501

and the attendant frustration that manifested in slave-owners. Even in Southern urban centers, slave labor did not rise about 10% of those enslaved.<sup>25</sup> These developments (or lack thereof) in the South produced two very different economic systems, with different sorts of economic elites, different struggles for the lower classes (or castes), and different ideologies to justify the continued existence of the system. This contributed greatly to the difficulties in uniting oppressed peoples for a common struggle.

While there was some cooperation between abolitionists and labor groups, there was also significant opposition between them. (Women working in textile mills in the 1820s notably supported anti-slavery causes.<sup>26</sup>) Yet there are many instances of these two movements fragmenting the cause of greater egalitarianism into separate camps. The dominant abolitionist strain utilized pre-existing organized elites of capitalists, clerics, and social activists.<sup>27</sup> These groups were not advocating for racial equality—but by hoping (genuinely or not) to aid the “least of these”, they avoided charges of behaving like aristocrats.<sup>28</sup> These organizations were often hostile to the plight of labor. There are certainly plenty of examples of white working class solidarity at the expense of black workers. Northern longshoremen would not permit black laborers amongst them, and riots such as the New York draft riots pitted working class whites

---

<sup>25</sup> Ashworth, p. 501-505. Notably, Goldin is also loathe to attribute the South’s low levels of industrialization to slavery, pointing out that the slave populations of Southern cities varied significantly over time. This dodges any explanation of the generally low (albeit fluctuating) level of city slaves and the low levels of industrialization and immigration.

<sup>26</sup> Norton, p. 223

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 222

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 224

against the cause of blacks. The following ditty from the *Republican Songbook* shows this preference for white workers that hindered the cause of African-Americans.

No more shall slavery's deadly blight  
Spread over our fair lands  
*We want our soil for free white men*  
With strong and willing hands

I looked to the South and I looked to the west  
And I saw Black Slavery a comin'  
With Democratic doughfaces harnessed up front  
Driving n-----s to the other side of the Jordan<sup>29</sup>

This is not to say that there were none that agitated for both labor and slaves—some, like the Beechers and George Bourne, fought for both causes. And Eric Foner notes that, despite much research, it is hard to know the entirety of the social composition of people for and against both movements. Despite our knowledge of the generally pro-capitalist nature of the abolitionist leadership, and the hostility of white workers to black competition, it is hard to make sweeping claims of movement composition. Foner quotes David Byron Davis as saying that “little is known of the rank and file members, to say nothing of the passive supports, of a single reform movement.”<sup>30</sup> Still, I think it is clear that the *effect* of these two movements was to work at cross-purposes. Anne Norton notes a general shift from labor approving more of the anti-slavery cause in the early 1820s to far more prevalent disapproval in the 1840s. She notes increases in immigration, greater employer abuses, and greater competition for jobs for exacerbating tensions. Workers felt increasing frustration as the slavery controversy heated up, but abolitionists did not acknowledge the suffering of wage slavery.

---

<sup>29</sup> Norton, p. 226 (Emphasis -and slur covering- mine)

<sup>30</sup> Foner, p. 27

Northern labor was certainly not the only force noticing the abolitionists. Even before the transformation of this movement from a stridently religious to more mainstream and economically-based one, the South reacted to the potential threat of a popular movement. And while Northern conservatives did not particularly enjoy having aspects of the free labor industrial system criticized (particularly parts they benefited from, such as inheritance laws), they did not react with remotely the same frenzy as the southerners. From the very beginning of the abolitionist movement, leading southerners such as Calhoun behaved in anticipation of the abolitionist movement becoming a Northern majority movement. And under such a verbal threat to their system, Southerners both restricted free speech and physically threatened those whose message they wished to ignore.<sup>31</sup>

From the emergence of abolitionism in the 1830s right up until the Civil War, Southern leaders were acting with a level of political desperation to match the level of civil liberties restraints. Calhoun went shopping around for northern political allies to avoid regional parties that would clash over the slavery issue. He attempted an alliance with the Whigs, but their differences were too great (they favored the protective tariff, internal improvements, and the National Bank).<sup>32</sup> Next, the great Southern senator attempted an alliance of Northern and Southern conservative property holders.<sup>33</sup> Psychological tactics were also used: poor Southern whites felt psychologically elevated and would therefore be less likely to claim economic solidarity to challenge the very aristocratic class they claimed commonality with.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Ashworth, p. 196

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 201

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 203

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 216

But in the end, the North and the South were too different—they each had different rationales for their dominance in their respective spheres. And further discussion clarified these differences—even Southerners who’d seen slavery as a necessary evil in the 1830s were wholly behind the system by the 1850s. These two regions began to feel like foreigners to each other.

This polarization of opinion over slavery took its toll on the second party system. Both the Whigs and the Democrats were national parties, capable of drawing support from the North and the South. But as the economy improved in the 1840s, each region was increasingly called upon to defend their economic system.<sup>35</sup> The debate increasingly focused on a struggle over the territories’ status as being slave or free states. The Whigs could not survive this political question, largely morphing into the Republican party. Burnham points out that the demise of the Whigs was no mere happenstance, that the ethno-cultural divisions within both camps spoke to an “essential fragility” of the system.<sup>36</sup> These divisions were more than skin-deep for the parties’ political foundation, and their failure to be accommodated was inevitable.

The fact that during the Civil War itself and through Reconstruction racial politics in more or less obvious guises dominated the national political scene is not one that necessitates elaborate proof. The party formation along Civil War alignments not only subverted possible labor efforts but allowed industrial elites far greater latitude to develop the economy to their liking.<sup>37</sup> And even after the Reconstruction soldiers departed they left a long shadow. Eric Foner has already provided excellent scholarship on how Southern Democrats used racial politics to

---

<sup>35</sup> Ashworth, p. 495

<sup>36</sup> Burnham, p. 294

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 298

undermine the Populists—this will be briefly described, as it provides a good book-end to the critical era I have analyzed. The spirit of Reconstruction was invoked by those who wanted to divide their opponent's ranks. Southern Democrats, in addition to terrorizing black voters of every political stripe, intimidated voters who considered voting Populist. They very successfully appealed to white voters on the basis of their race, telling them that the Populists, with their startling egalitarian rhetoric, were not an appropriate electoral choice for white men. This continued until the end of the century. A striking example, unusual in its degree but not its tactics, is the 1892 congressional race in Georgia's tenth district:

Watson's Democratic opponent, Major James Black, invoked the familiar appeals of Southern sectionalism, stressing his own Civil War service and the need for white Southerners to stay away from the old party to avoid the possibility of Negro "domination." The Democratic press, solidly behind him, raised the specter of Reconstruction and the "revival of bayonet rule." Watson's ability to overcome such Democratic tactics seemed so symbolically linked with the Southern future of the third party that though the ensuing campaign was waged in a single congressional district no less a personage than Grover Cleveland confided that "he was almost as much interested in Major Black's campaign in the Tenth District in Georgia as he was in his own election."<sup>38</sup>

This extraordinary tale was in many ways not particularly unusual for the time. Now, some of the people who participated in preventing the Populists from holding office had socialism specifically or economics broadly as one of their concerns or even a major worry. For example, for the above congressional seat New York investors, and the railroad and insurance industries were persuaded to donate the aggregate sum of \$40,000—a huge sum for that time, particularly in a House race. Many of these donors were likely motivated mostly or solely by financial concerns. But the intervention of big business and finance was unusual, while racial intimidation was rampant. And the bitterness with which it was carried out made it unlikely that those suppressing voters were dispassionately using a tactic they knew to be effective. Perhaps the sad

---

<sup>38</sup> Goodwyn, p. 189

words of George W. Julian, the crusader for forty acres and a mule, are applicable here: “The American people, are emphatically a Negro-hating people.”<sup>39</sup>

But would have labor necessarily have flourished in these periods? It is extremely likely. Our nation’s first labor movement of the 1820s and 1830s that was subverted by the abolitionists had clear social and economic causes, just as later situations did. In the 1820s the factory system emerged, skills were diluted and undervalued, a growing wealth disparity and stratification was emerging, particularly in the coastal cities.<sup>40</sup> These problems continued to grow during the abolitionist movement. After the Civil War, not only was our country in for the economic shock of rebuilding tremendous damage, but the wheels of modernity had begun to move faster still. Railroads and big industry were rapidly expanding, particularly during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The number of working poor working wage jobs and/or living on (manipulated) credit vastly expanded. America’s growing pains and the increasing number of the disenfranchised were ripe for socialist success—but for one issue. We had to allay the pull of caste politics before we could address class.

\* \* *Sectional Parties: Our Two-Party System’s Hostility to Socialism* \* \*

Volumes have been written about the aversion of our two-party system to third parties. As such, the discussion given here will be comparatively brief. The United States has had a two-party system with brief periods of interruption since 1790, but our current system dates back to

---

<sup>39</sup> Foner, p. 78

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 58

the Civil War. This is significant for socialism's failure because the regional nature of two-party politics explains both why neither of the major parties became socialist as well as why no socialist third party could emerge successfully. (1912 is the "high-water mark" for socialism's national electoral success at 6% of the popular vote for President.<sup>41</sup>) Sectional (and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, heavily race-infused) parties ensured that socialism did not emerge in one of the major parties, as has been previously discussed. The lack of a parliamentary system makes it even easier for race to fragment parties into heterogeneous coalitions, preventing more systematic economic benefits to all. It is worth noting Walter Dean Burnham's related conception of the four major functions of political parties. These four include constituent, office-filling, political education and policy-making functions.<sup>42</sup> He notes the inverse relationship between policy and constituent functions, observing that "[i]f the social context in which a two-party system operates is extensively fragmented along regional, ethnic, and other lines, its major components will tend to be overwhelmingly concerned with coalition-building and internal conflict management."<sup>43</sup> Burnham notes a decided paucity of policy-making and political education functions in America. This gives a different, more theoretic way to conceptualize racial (and related regional) tensions preempting socialism. (Burnham extends this analysis to ethnic whites as well, and tends to focus later in history than my thesis, but his theory is still applicable.) Our two-party system, in a variety of ways, has ensured that any third party, regardless of their philosophical views, has gained any meaningful success.

---

<sup>41</sup> Lipset & Marks, p. 45

<sup>42</sup> Burnham, p. 278

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 287

There are a number of reasons for the American party system's hostility to third parties. The single-member district with plurality voting (and no second, "run-off" ballot) is the biggest (but not the only) determining factor here. A vote for a third party is typically seen as a "wasted" vote when the threshold for success is to get more votes than any other candidate in the race. By contrast, systems with proportional representation and multiple member districts may only need a relatively small minority in order to gain a seat. Thus, a constituency with a sizeable minority, perhaps 25%, will always lose the seat in a plurality voting system, but surely win a seat or multiple seats with proportional representation. The effect of our system is that third parties, if they show enough success to be noticed, usually alert the major parties to the importance of that third party's issue(s). They may win an ideological success by being subsumed into a major party, but electoral success is usually beyond their grasp.

Ballot access (particularly in Presidential races) is also difficult for third party candidates. States create their own ballot rules and require thresholds for third-party candidates that are not present for the approved major parties. Merely getting on the ballot can be a costly affair and sap a candidate of money, time, and human resources. The institutional machinery that makes the rules for running for office also dominates the political machinery of officeholders. There are no official congressional roles for third parties; they will never be Speaker of the House or have a Whip. On the rare occasions that third party candidates do get elected to Congress, they typically caucus with one of the major parties rather than relinquish their part in this powerful tool of politics. Even the most fiercely-minded Independent, Socialist, or Reform party candidate would not give up the ability to vote for Speaker of the House if their side of the ideological spectrum required their vote. And the institution of the Presidency, since it is distinct

from Congress, does not lend itself to coalition-building. The tantalizing office of the Presidency also tends to make electoral success even more difficult than at the local, state-wide, or congressional levels. Typically, the higher the stakes (and higher the resource threshold) for office, the poorly third parties tend to perform.<sup>44</sup>

In the final analysis, there are perhaps more explanations for socialism's failure in America than there have been elected socialists (above the local level, anyway). Many of these reasons involve good analysis but do not identify the major causal factors of our exceptionalism. For example, many of the theses relating to our relative lack of class consciousness (the absence of feudalism, relative prosperity, higher social mobility, aversion to dogmatic theories, etc.) raise the threshold for socialist success, but do not thwart it entirely. Other explanations identify factors that are chronologically too late to have been the reason one of the two major parties did not turn socialist. Looking at the *modus operandi* of unions late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century fails to recognize the racial politics (and the attendant regionally-based parties) that shaped the two parties previously. This is not to say that racial politics has explained the failure of socialism at all junctures since the Civil War—one can make an excellent case for FDR's co-opting of socialists after the radicalization of the Great Depression. But looking at critical periods in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is clear that racial politics warded our system away from socialism when we would have been the most susceptible to this ideology. And it set a system in place that would raise the threshold for any third party success almost impossibly high—only to be truly tested again by the Great Depression. This is not to say that America will never have a socialist major party. As modern life grows more complex government will likely grow as well to address those

---

<sup>44</sup> Lipset & Marks, p. 50

challenges. Yet the threshold for a major party to become socialist is quite high. In such a scenario, even the most ardent foe of socialism is likely to deem the social cause of such a shift to be worse than the political effect. Hopefully we will not see this day soon.

## Bibliography:

- Ashworth, John. 1995. *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Volume One: Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Boorstin, Daniel. 1953. *The Genius of American Politics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Burnham, Walter Dean. 1967. "Party Systems and the Political Process." In *The American Party Systems: Stages of Development*, eds Walter Dean Burnham and William Nisbet Chambers. New York: Oxford University Press.
- De Toqueville, Alexis. 2000. *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dubofsky, Melvyn and Foster Rhea Dulles. 2004. *Labor in America: A History*. New York: Harlan Davidson.
- Foner, Eric. 1980. *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Goldfield, Michael. 1997. *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics*. New York: The New Press.
- Goodwyn, Lawrence. 1978. *The Populist Movement*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The Liberal Tradition in America*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Kammen, Michael. 1993. "The Problem of American Exceptionalism: A Reconsideration." *American Quarterly* 45: 1-43.
- Kolko, Gabriel. 1963. *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916*. New York: The Free Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1963. *The First New Nation*. New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Gary Marks. 2000. *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lowi, Theodore. 1984. "Why is there no Socialism in the United States? A Federal Analysis." *International Political Science Review* 5: 369-380.
- Norton, Anne. 1986. *Alternative Americas: A Reading of Antebellum Political Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.