



Sally M. Miller. *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century American Socialism*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996. xvi + 303 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8153-1163-8.

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Published on H-Urban (October, 1997)

Diversity and the Socialist Party in America

Sally M. Miller's new book on the Socialist Party in America focuses on the diversity of its membership during the height of the Party's power in the labor movement and electoral politics (1901-1920). Miller also covers frequent Party debates over the issues that were of concern to the nation as a whole in the early twentieth century—women's political rights, the plight of African-Americans, and the impact of immigration on the character of the American working-class. The first part of Miller's book is a collection of essays, half of which have been previously published over the last couple decades, although these have been revised. The first group of essays provides an overview of the relationship between the Socialist Party and the Second International over the issues of "race," "immigration," and "gender," and each of the subsequent three sections is devoted to one of these topics. The latter half of the book contains an extensive collection of documents relating to the interaction of women, African-Americans, and immigrants with(in) the Socialist Party.

Miller begins her book with an analysis of the relationship between the Socialist Party and the Second International as evidenced in Party documents and Congressional records (several of which are included in the documents printed at the end of the book). Miller concludes that while the Socialist Party was strengthened through their relationship with an international organization, American socialists took a fairly pragmatic approach when interpreting the resolutions and lead of the International on the issues of race, gender, ethnicity and immigration. The issue of race, for example, was ap-

proached by European socialists in the context of imperialism, while the Americans were specifically concerned, according to Miller, with the proper status and role of African-Americans. Again, in terms of immigration, the International and the Socialist Party reached different conclusions. While the "Congress passed a resolution condemning the exclusion by a government of any people" (p. 14), many American socialists continued to actively support immigration restriction, especially for Asian immigrants.

Race was an issue repeatedly raised in socialist debates over immigration and African-American participation in the Party, but it is one to which Miller devotes limited space. In the shortest chapter of her book, Miller documents the complex interaction between African-Americans and the Socialist Party in an effort correct the work of other scholars who have argued that the Party was either completely racist or completely inclusive. Miller also hopes to fill in the gap left by what she perceives as the excessive attention paid to the relationship between black Americans and the Communist Party instead of the Socialist Party. While African-Americans were officially welcomed into the Party at the 1901 founding convention and voted enthusiastically for the Party, their reception differed largely by region, ranging from lukewarm to hostile. Party outreach to African-Americans was minimal, though black socialist magazines like *The Messenger* repeatedly encouraged their readership to join the Party. Miller concludes, rather simplistically, that a closer relationship between the two failed to develop because their interests were not mutual.

African-Americans had “demonstrated very little interest in the abolition of capitalism,” while the Socialist Party was primarily interested in African-Americans as workers. These groups, therefore, “remained invisible” to each other (p. 42).

The impact of race and racism, however, reached beyond the debates over the shape of African-American participation in the Socialist Party. Some of the best known socialist figures of this period, such as Victor Berger, were vocally racist. Yet Miller argues that Berger was exceptional among American socialists and doesn't pursue an analysis of the influence of race theories on Party policy. She therefore misses an excellent opportunity to contextualize the Socialist Party in terms of national debates over race. Race was a broadly conceived term during the first decades of the twentieth century, and Miller over-simplifies its importance to the Socialist Party by narrowing the scope of her examination to African-Americans. Some of the most interesting comments about race actually appear in socialist debates over immigration. This also would have been an opportune moment to connect her study with some of the excellent recent works on whiteness, which have added a level of analytic complexity to the study of race and which is largely absent in Miller's own discussions of race.[1]

Miller's examination of immigration and the Socialist Party avoids the issue of race altogether and focuses instead on case studies of two midwestern cities—Milwaukee and of St. Louis. Both of these cities' socialist movements were dominated by European immigrants, mainly Germans and Irish, but the political fortunes of the Socialist Party in the electoral process of each city were radically different. In Milwaukee between 1910 and 1912, the Social Democrats enjoyed a brief period of almost total political control, while the St. Louis socialists failed to achieve any measure of political power.

Miller looks at the ways that the Milwaukee Social Democrats both used the electoral process to achieve a significant number of social reforms in working conditions, education, and leisure, (p. 59-62) and were constrained by their role within the liberal political system from addressing issues of structural inequality. Far from the revolutionaries they aspired to be, the Milwaukee socialists became more like other reform-oriented progressives of their day. The Social Democrats demonstrated their support for reform, not revolution, and during and after the war also developed a patriotic American (as opposed to ethnic immigrant) image, and hence attracted a broad-based coalition of both middle and working class

constituents that continued to vote a socialist mayor into office for almost two decades.

In St. Louis, Socialists also had a strong ethnic base, and they ran repeatedly for political positions, but they failed to achieve anything in the way of electoral success. Miller suggests that their lack of success could be partially blamed on the continued functioning of the Party as a “German working man's club” which constrained them from developing broad-based support. The limited role of women could also account for the failure of the Party in St. Louis (p. 78), as well as the fact that the Party lacked a nationally known figure. Both the role of gender and the significance of German ethnicity are provocative issues that Miller raises but does not pursue in any analytical depth.

While these two chapters are both included in the section on “ethnicity and immigration,” Miller's consideration of the role of ethnic identity in socialist politics and in the nation as a whole is severely limited. Ethnicity, in fact, appears more as a jumping off point, from which Miller moves into an examination of party politics and policies and her analysis of the experience of socialists in the electoral process.

On the national level, socialist women seemed to benefit the most from their involvement in an international movement. Miller examines the role of women as Party members and within the Party bureaucracy in two chapters. As with her discussion of race, Miller does not work with an expanded notion of gender. She is more concerned with documenting the place of women in American socialism than to analyze the social construction of gender norms and identities.

American socialist women, through the International, had access to a multi-national campaign and activist community for women's rights within the socialist movement. While the International and the Socialist Party both voiced their commitment to the “political and legal equality” (p. 17) of women, and while women were represented at all levels of party bureaucracy, both national and international, organizational support for universal suffrage did not materialize. The lack of active support was not, Miller is clear to point out, a simple matter of sexism, but a more complex issue relating to interpretations of Marxist philosophical thought—should sex oppression be addressed before the resolution of the social question? The debate over whether gender should be considered a significant variable in addition to class elicited support from socialist women on both sides of the question, which demonstrates the diversity that char-

acterized such women; often the most radical women “in terms of Marxist ideology” (p. 110) were not supportive of protective legislation and suffrage (p. 15-16), while those lobbying for the “Woman Question” framed their critiques in terms of traditional gender roles and norms. Miller concludes that the “vision of socialist women was neither cohesive, incisive, nor innovative” (p. 111).

Miller’s second chapter on women focuses on the work and life of Mary Marcy, a Party member and critic through her role as columnist and editor of the *International Socialist Review*. Marcy is little known today because she did not leave behind an autobiography or a collection of personal papers. Her writings for the *International Socialist Review*, and her plays and pamphlets, were, however, influential and controversial. Miller devotes a substantial amount of her chapter to a discussion of the content of Marcy’s writings. Marcy was an outspoken critic of the Socialist Party from the left, and her views were much more akin to the Wobblies than the Party line. By approaching Marcy’s life through her writing, Miller has produced an informative and sympathetic portrait of Marcy that also demonstrates the complexity of the history of American socialism and its relation to other radical movements and labor organizations. Miller succeeds in drawing from scant primary sources a coherent narrative of Marcy’s personal and political life. In the process, she demonstrates the necessity of looking outside Party documents to write a history of American socialism that incorporates the stories of individual activists.

The final section of the book devoted to “Documents” includes a number of articles from socialist magazines (including *The Messenger*, *Socialist Woman*, and *International Socialist Review*), as well as excerpts from the Proceedings of the 1908 and 1912 National Conventions, resolutions passed by the Socialist Party and the Second In-

ternational on the “Negro” question, and the writings of noted individuals, such as W.E.B. DuBois, on socialism. Miller has not written introductory parts to each section, preferring to allow the pieces in this rich collection of primary materials to speak on their own.

Overall, Miller’s book is a useful addition to the literature on American labor history and socialism. The inclusion of such an extensive number of primary documents also makes this book a useful teaching and research tool. What is most disappointing about Miller’s book, however, is her reluctance to place American socialism more firmly in the context of early twentieth-century American society. Although Miller concentrates on issues that have been of much interest and innovative analysis across the disciplines, she avoids engaging this broad and diverse body of literature. While she may perceive her most immediate audience to be other scholars who are also focused on American socialism, her analysis of the dynamics of ethnicity, race, and gender would have been greatly enhanced had she incorporated some of the recent high quality work that has been produced on these questions from other perspectives.

Notes:

[1]. The study of whiteness is extensive and interdisciplinary, including historical studies as well as work by media and literary scholars. See, for example, David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991) and Alexander Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. (London: Verso, 1991)

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Citation: Chloe Carroll-Burke. Review of Miller, Sally M., *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century American Socialism*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

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