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**Race and Gilded Age American Socialism**

In March of 2020, the democratic socialist Bernie Sanders's campaign for president of the United States stalled in South Carolina. After beating eventual nominee Joe Biden in the Democratic Party's primary elections in New Hampshire and Nevada, Sanders struggled to match Biden's support among Black voters in the southern state. Sanders's inability to win the majority of Black voters became one of the dominant explanations for his campaign's ultimate failure and, for some moderates and liberals, a valid reason to oppose democratic socialism altogether.[1] While the narrative that Sanders struggled with voters of color always lacked nuance—he received considerable support from Latinos and younger Black voters—the narrative had power partly because of US socialism's troubled history with racism. Lorenzo Costaguta's *Workers of All Colors Unite* provides welcome context for nineteenth-century socialism's approach to race relations. The book is as valuable for students of radical and ethnic US history as it is for contemporary activists who wish to better navigate debates over class, race, and identity that continue to rankle the US Left.

Costaguta's major intervention is to point out the significance of race and ethnicity to a period of US socialism that historians have assumed was apathetic toward racial difference and inequality. Historians of the US Left have long argued that before the 1930s “socialists rarely discussed race at all, and when they did, it was mostly to remind workers that they ought to be focused on class exploitation rather than race exploitation” (p. 9). Costaguta's period spans from the end of southern Reconstruction around 1876 to the turn of the twentieth century, roughly the era of the Second International's greatest relevancy. As Costaguta notes, this phase of socialist history has been characterized as apathetic at best to the problem of racism. Contrary to this characterization, Costaguta follows recent studies by Paul Heideman, David Roediger, and J. Michelle Coughlan that “explain
the origins of American socialism through the lens of race” (p. 8).[2] Out of these studies, Costaguta’s may be the most expansive. While other monographs tend to focus specifically on Black/white tensions and collaborations, Costaguta devotes each chapter of his monograph to a different ethnic group’s encounter with white-led socialist parties. The result is a book that successfully challenges binaries that present the postbellum socialist movement as either indifferent or actively hostile to embattled ethnic groups, and instead demonstrates how socialist racial thinking functioned differently in relation to Black, Chinese, and Native American workers, respectively.

Chapter 1 successfully makes the case that the fight against chattel slavery was germane to the genesis of US socialism. Focusing on German American radicals such as Adolph Douai, August Willich, and Joseph Weydemeyer, Costaguta traces a revolutionary lineage from the 1848 people’s uprisings in Europe through radical abolitionism in the United States and finally to the postbellum socialist movement. These German socialists saw the liberation of Black slaves as a necessary step toward the liberation of all exploited workers, and radicals, including Weydemeyer, put their lives on the line for this belief by fighting in the American Civil War. However, Costaguta argues that their belief that abolition would “be a prelude to a new epoch of extended workers’ rights” and that freedpeople would naturally consider wage slavery an even worse condition than chattel slavery was ultimately an “illusion” that “did not translate into any tangible political advancement for the American socialist movement” (p. 21).

Chapter 2 offers one of the most valuable contributions in the book: intellectual context for the racialist attitudes of white socialists. Not content to settle on personal prejudice as the only explanation for the whiteness of early socialism, Costaguta identifies Darwinian evolutionary theory as a major influence on prominent white socialists such as Douai. Mining Douai’s newspaper articles about the supposedly geographic causes of racial difference, Costaguta suggests that Douai developed an “original theory of human transmutation that ... cast[s] a significant light on the racial thinking of an early generation of German American immigrants who interpreted racial policies through the lens of scientific racialism” (p. 58). Douai’s idiosyncratic ideas—he believed in essential differences across races but also called for open borders and interracial marriage—enable Costaguta to argue that racialist socialism did not always necessitate support for white supremacy. Of course, Costaguta also presents cases of white socialists who drew on the same evolutionary theory to justify what Costaguta calls “white supremacist working-class internationalism” that posited a sort of herrenvolk socialist republic (p. 85). Costaguta’s attention to the intellectual milieu that birthed a variety of racialist attitudes in the socialist movement is a vital contribution. By casting his book as an intellectual history of both socialism and scientific racialism, he contextualizes current political trends from the Left’s calls for open borders to the radical Right’s exploitation of white working-class resentment.

Chapter 3 moves from the Black/white binary that characterizes much work on the Left’s racial history to consider the particularly egregious positions that white socialists took toward Chinese immigrants in the 1870s and 1880s. Chinese workers were the primary labor force building railways in California. Costaguta provides detailed accounts of how these workers arrived in the United States, what their ambitions were, and the double oppression of capitalist and mafia bosses who lorded over their precarious situations. Continuing a pattern that becomes apparent by chapter 3, the white socialists at the center of Costaguta’s narrative displayed little care or sympathy for the plight of immigrant workers from regions outside of Europe or North America. This chapter contextualizes the ongoing antinomies of labor radicalism in the United States. As Costaguta phrases it, the “Socialist Labor Party’s position on Chinese im-
migration … helps us understand the ways in which a movement constitutively bound to working-class internationalism reacted to a strongly exclusivist political project” that advocated for the forced deportation of Chinese railroad men (p. 74). The historical proximity of labor strikes to race riots should make any socialist uncomfortable; the labor protest-turned-anti-Chinese riot that Costaguta recounts in this chapter would repeat forty years later in the East St. Louis massacre of 1917. [3] The latter event is outside of the book’s period, which attests to Costaguta’s ability to discern the most salient phenomena that recur throughout the racial history of US socialism.

Native Americans played a different role in socialist discourse than either Black or Chinese Americans. Instead of voicing apathy or supremacy, white socialists romanticized Indigenous societies as anti-capitalist foils to the industrial era. Returning to his German primary sources, Costaguta reveals a rhetorical strategy in which socialists reversed the “savage/civilized” binary used to justify the settler-colonial eradication of Native peoples. By presenting communal Native societies as the true “civilization” over “barbaric” capitalism, German socialists simultaneously encouraged respect for Native societies while forcing those societies into the scheme of “simplistic, mono-linear” Marxist teleology (p. 136). “Primitive” Native communism was supposed to be the first epoch toward the imminent, “advanced” European/international socialism. As much as this scheme reveals German socialists’ admiration for Native Americans, it was also deployed to justify the forced assimilation of Natives into white settler culture.

Costaguta thoroughly details the systemic racial blind spots that hampered late nineteenth-century socialism. He is clearly sympathetic to the aims of the radical Left and believes that racism and Eurocentrism have been primary causes for socialism’s marginal influence on US politics. However, the book at times repeats the missteps of some of its more well-intentioned sources by relying too heavily on white interpretations of racial inequality. We learn about white socialists’ thoughts on Black, Chinese, and Native American workers mainly through the sources of white socialists. For instance, Costaguta references articles that Socialist Labor Party leader Daniel De Leon published in Black newspapers such as the New York Age and AME Church Review (pp. 159-160). Did the editors or contributors to these papers respond to De Leon’s arguments that anti-Black discrimination was entirely due to Black Americans’ status as low-wage workers rather than to racism? Why did these newspapers choose to publish De Leon’s writing in the first place if socialism was of such little importance to Black politics at the turn of the century? Considering the existence of work from Heideman and Shelley Streeby that has foregrounded nineteenth-century Black and Latino writings on socialism and anarchism, Costaguta might have missed an opportunity to present the thoughts of Black Americans on socialism beyond Peter H. Clark, the most prominent Black socialist of the latter nineteenth century and a focus of chapter 4.[4] Costaguta thus leaves room for further studies to center print cultures and writings from the ethnic groups that appear in this book.

Ultimately, Workers of All Colors Unite broadens the scholarly understanding of race and socialism across time, place, and ethnicity. The book treats the period between 1876 and the turn of the century with long-needed focus and depth of understanding. While it is not the first work to posit the central importance of race relations to the US socialist movement, it has immense potential to open disciplinary borders between Asian American, Indigenous, and radical studies.

Notes


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