

Patricia Cayo Sexton

**The WAR on
LABOR
and the LEFT**

**Understanding America's
Unique Conservatism**

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The War on Labor and the Left

FOR BRENDAN SEXTON
AND MICHAEL HARRINGTON
IN ABSENTIA

In rereading Michael Harrington's seminal book *Socialism*, I came upon this inscription in the copy on my shelf: "For Brendan. Not just because you're a fine guy or because of your magnificent record as a trade unionist, but also because us Irishmen on the left have to stick together. With affection, thanks and three cheers for James Connolly.

Mike. Chicago, April 1972."

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Patricia Cayo Sexton

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Introduction

AERICAN LABOR IS UNIQUE among developed democracies in two major and related respects: Its union movement is weak and declining (as measured by membership), and it lacks the kind of labor party that flourishes in almost all other democracies. A vast amount of literature, in fact, is devoted to the political uniqueness of America—its conservatism and its singular lack of a mass labor, or social democratic, or democratic socialist party. This phenomenon has been noted even in the *Wall Street Journal*, where it was said that a European conservative “would be comfortable somewhere in the middle of the American Democratic party,” that European leftists are “genuine socialists” with no mainstream equal in the United States, and that only 1.5 real capitalist countries exist in the world—the United States and, after a fashion, Great Britain under Margaret Thatcher.¹

Countless explanations of American conservatism have been offered, most of them having to do with the presumed conservatism of American labor or that group’s internal weaknesses. I will argue here, however, that although those popular views have some validity, the source of conservatism lies much less in labor than in its adversaries, in their unique corporate power and wealth and the use of those resources in waging what has been in many ways a uniquely repressive war on the “labor-left” (unions and left of center politics).

The casualties of that war mount ever higher in the current era, as do the complexity and potency of the strategies used. Historically, those strategies have included the use of private and public armed force against unionism, dominance of the mass media, the stigmatizing of much labor-left activity as “un-American,” manipulation of the legal system and labor relations, control of economic policy and the globalization of the U.S. economy, and especially the heavy influence brought to bear on government policy and on a political system that is uniquely inhospitable to challenges from the labor-left. All strategies are subjects of discussion in this book.

In the past, the war has been hot, coercive, violent, and, as at present, always political. In recent decades, the violence has somewhat receded,

and the war has assumed new global dimensions. Economic elites have pioneered new ways of moving capital and industry around and out of the country, and what was once a simple domestic war has been transformed into a star-wars version of the same, the casualties of which include millions of American jobs lost, usually the best jobs, union jobs, and often the unions themselves. Ousted from these "exported" jobs has been a vast army of American workers, many of them skilled and experienced people whom employers have brought in as a reserve army of permanent replacements for striking workers, thus robbing labor of its major defensive weapon, the strike. The results of these trends are broken strikes, broken unions, victories for conservatism, and further losses of labor's political influence.

The war has had few intermissions, but it has generally escalated during business recessions when employers try to drive down wages and drive out unions. Indeed, labor's adversaries become most warlike when recessions weaken their economic powers. This weakness might be expected to give labor an advantage, except that at such times, labor's bargaining powers are even weaker than those of employers and its political influence—unlike its equivalents in other democracies—is similarly weak.

Comparisons

Although it is generally believed that there has been *less* repression of the labor-left in the United States than in other developed democracies, the records do not bear this assumption out. In fact, they strongly suggest that the ferocity of the war in the United States has been in many ways unparalleled in the experience of comparable democracies. Cross-national comparisons, however, are both the "most valuable and most dubious way of writing history," W. D. Rubinstein writes, valuable because they illuminate events and dubious because all nations have a unique history.²

Yet the riddle of America's unique conservatism conceals many secrets about the country's experience and future and invites whatever facts or speculations, comparative or otherwise, that might be brought to bear on its solution. With that invitation in mind, an inquiry into the relatively unexplored subject of repression as a feature of American conservatism is initiated in this book. The subject is one about which many volumes, perhaps libraries, could be written, and it is hoped that other people will join the search in order to confirm, deny, denounce, or supplement what is said here.

Comparisons with other societies, however, are not really needed to make many major points, for it can be demonstrated from the American experience alone that repression of various sorts has played a key role in sustaining American conservatism. Yet comparisons with other societies can add support to domestic references and are included when data are available. Since democracies vary so much in their histories, the comparisons are made almost exclusively with other English-speaking countries, as their cultures and histories most closely resemble the American situation.

Comparisons are made only with regard to experiences in developed democracies under duly elected governments. It certainly is not argued that U.S. repression of the labor-left has exceeded that of dictatorships, present or past. Clearly, the Nazi record on this score was infinitely worse, being one of total repression of unions and leftist political groups. After World War II, however, the German labor-left resumed its pre-Nazi political status and even greatly increased its power. The Nazi terror did not permanently destroy the German labor-left. In the United States, on the other hand, repression of the labor-left has had a cumulative debilitating effect, interrupted for any sustained period only by the New Deal era.

Nor is it suggested that the uprisings of U.S. labor have matched the scope of revolutionary uprisings against dictatorships. Mass uprisings against governments rarely occur in developed democracies, mainly because people seeking relief have an electoral option, the ballot box. The fact that true options—significantly different approaches to government—may not be available to voters is likely to result, not in revolution, but in abstention from the electoral process, social alienation in its many forms, social unrest and personalized discontent, and militant unionism in the workplace.

Framework of the Book

The ultimate concern of this book is with labor's contemporary position, but the emphasis is on the historical prelude to it, the worn path that has led to America's unusual conservatism and labor's present predicament. The history is analytic and narrative, as histories are, but it is not the typical historical chronology of dates and events, an orderly progression through the pages of history. Instead, I seek to identify and explore some of the critical variables in the life of the American labor-left that may help in understanding its present crisis.

My aim is to speak to a general audience of interested readers rather than to a specialized one of historians or related professionals. The facts

about labor conflicts that are used to illustrate major points about repression are well known to labor historians, but they are given a new frame here: a new way of looking at the forces at work in these major conflicts, the power and repression involved in them, and the respective roles played by workers, unions, employers, the media, and government. It is hoped that a new view of labor history might reduce some of the factional disputes about that history, but repression, as it turns out, is a highly charged and controversial subject that stirs up some impassioned and unexpected responses, so the debates may not recede, only turn in a new direction.

Social researchers generally seek their subjects among subordinate rather than dominant groups, in losing rather than winning contestants, and in the usual victims of labor disputes rather than the usual victors. This inquiry will seek to add more balance to such an approach. The case studies of labor struggles described herein end with the 1940s and the final organization of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—the main point the case studies build toward—and discussions of the manipulative strategies employed mainly since the 1940s then follow. Again, other people are invited to update the case studies and refine the broad brush strokes of this inquiry. The literature on America's uniqueness is already voluminous, but much more can be said. Similarly, the notes herein, though culled only from the most relevant writing, are plentiful but only a preamble to what might yet be cited on the subject.

Most popular explanations of America's uniqueness draw many sweeping and emphatic conclusions about the sources of American conservatism without much evidence to sustain them. My intent here is to challenge these views, not with other generalities, but with references to records of critical events in American history and to the repressive and often unique strategies used with such telling results in the war on labor.

The book is not prescriptive, but it does deal in various places with some prospects for change. The labor-left is not caught in the iron grip of history. The fact that it advanced as far as it did during the 1930s and 1940s, and the successes of the labor-left in other democracies, indicate that change is possible and that, given the current crisis of both capitalism and communism, the long-term revival of the American labor-left is altogether likely. In labor circles it is said that employers, not unions, organize workers. Perhaps in the political arena, employers will also stimulate the success of a new politics.

The book expanded far beyond what was originally intended, a historical review of the violent and more coercive repression of labor. This review made it clear, however, that much more was involved than physical coercion. Law and government had to be included, perhaps

especially when they touched on the "radical" politics that are presumed to be marginal to labor history. But far from being marginal, the absence of a labor party or a serious politics on the left accounts for much of labor's woes, so the subject could hardly be omitted. Nor could economics be left out, for how can labor's present decline be explained without reference to business cycles, deindustrialization, and the globalized economy? Comparative materials had to be included, incomplete as they may be, since they tell us so much about the meaning of the American experience. Control of the media, the messengers of conservatism, is also a crucial part of the whole and could not be overlooked, and labor relations, an inventive source of antiunionism and the concern of most professionals involved with labor, could hardly be omitted since the broadened scope of this inquiry is especially relevant to that topic.

Finally, foreign policy and the related subject of domestic un-Americanism could not be slighted. Although seemingly tangential to the whole, they may instead be the core of it, for how can the U.S. economic decline—and the decline of labor—be explained without reference to imperial overreach, military costs (in money and talent), neglect of domestic production, and global politics? And how can the virtual "death of dissent" be explained without reference to the excesses of the cold war and the domestic crusade against un-Americanism?

Americans obviously love their country, and for many good reasons, but it does not follow that they also love the raw brand of capitalism that dominates its economy and politics. Yet crusades against un-Americanism have tried to equate the two and to make criticism of the latter a sin against the former.

Definitions

The word "repression" is used broadly herein. To repress is to check, restrain, or hold down; these words clearly apply to the history of the labor-left. Less coercive means of repression, however, are usually referred to as "manipulative," yet they sometimes produce greater repression than the coercive varieties. Objections to the phrase "blaming the victim" have become popular. Victims usually bring on their own problems, it is said, and therefore need to be blamed, but this assumption is overgeneralized and also a sad sign of the times. Surely if people are indeed victimized by others, as so many dissenters who have struggled to combine and organize have been, it is clearly unfair to blame them when they fall.

Like "repression," the word "power" is one that goes in and out of fashion with the times, rising in popularity during periods of insurgency

and declining during conservative eras. But the word has an objective reality that is unrelated to its popularity, and its use is indispensable in discussing politics and collective bargaining. Debates over what power is and who has how much of it are numerous; in this book, "power" refers to control over critical resources (financial, institutional, coercive, political, ideological, and communicative resources), to decisions controlling the use of those resources, and to the ability to produce intended effects.

Max Weber regarded the concept of power as an amorphous subject because even the least of us can in some situations produce intended effects on others. Certainly power is diffused, so that everyone has some of it, but the point is that some people have far more of it than others. This book deals with four forms of power: the force of arms and the law, the manipulation of economic policy and subtler forms of subjection, the persuasion conducted most conspicuously by the mass media, and the institutional authority exercised by economic elites.

The terms "elites," "capitalists," "business," and "employers," though obviously not synonymous, are close enough to be used somewhat interchangeably, recognizing however that "business" and "employers" are more restrictive terms than "capitalists" or "elites" and that there is some range of social perspective in each of these groups.

As for political parties, the terms "labor," "social democratic," and "democratic socialist" are often used interchangeably, not because they are exact synonyms, but because the parties of the democratic Socialist International with which they are affiliated often use these various terms without respect to party program. In other, stricter usages, labor parties have closer ties to unions, and based on post-1945 understandings, the policies of democratic socialist parties are to the left of social democratic parties.

"Labor" as used herein refers to workers, the working class, and unions, though "organized labor" is the preferred term for the last. The working class, it should be noted, includes not only blue-collar and industrial workers but also those who are neither top executives nor self-employed—that is, the vast majority of employed people. Many American workers in all these job categories now belong to unions; in Sweden, where upward of 95 percent of the work force is organized, virtually all working people are union members.

The term "left" refers to a broad spectrum of politics on the left of center, and "labor-left" refers to the twin organized endeavors of labor: unionism and politics. Of special concern are the political paths taken by organized labor, paths that intersect, parallel, and sometimes join those of most groups on the political left. Labor and the left have been more or less part of the same general social movement, and their histories,

concerns, and destinies are intertwined, though not always in happy or wholesome embrace. My task in this book, among others, is to shed more light on where these paths have converged and why they have so often diverged.

For Europeans but not for Americans, the distinction between "socialist" and "communist" is very clear. Despite gross misunderstandings in the United States about the meaning of these terms, it may be time at last to resurrect the words and their profound distinctions for use in standard discourse. In all cases in this book, the word "socialism" refers to "democratic socialism," as socialism, according to an informed and commonly accepted definition, is not possible without democratic sociopolitical institutions. It may seem strange, in light of events in Eastern Europe, to flaunt the words "democratic socialism," but it was not socialism that fell in the East but communism—socialism's opposite number. Indeed, democratic socialism is alive everywhere, and usually thriving, among the developed democracies of the world. Only in America has the average citizen been trained to automatically recoil at what is for so many people in the world a friendly term, "democratic socialism."

"Free markets," "economic competition," and "profits" are not at all incompatible with democratic socialism, at least for most of its advocates. But many aspects of raw capitalism *are* incompatible, including private monopolies that replace free markets and competition, socially irresponsible capital investment policies, economic instability and depression, the growing polarization of income and wealth, and oligarchic control of political, economic, and social institutions.

The phrase "the war on labor" was chosen with some reflective attention to the unacademic sound of it, but it is my conviction that academics are as entitled as others to call a spade a spade. The phrase is not a war *with* labor but a war *on* labor; the preposition matters for it conveys the reality of American labor relations, past and present, and of a struggle that is hardly a contest between equals. This book has a point of view, but no more so than other discourses on American uniqueness, the main difference being that no effort has been made here to soften or obscure that viewpoint.

Social Welfare and the Balance of Power

The conservative assault on the labor-supported social welfare state—social security and other loosely woven safety nets—has paralleled the war on labor in the workplace, and although this assault is not singled out for elaboration, it is a vital part of the whole and references to it recur in the book. This assault on what is a generally accepted part of

the quality of community life in most democracies has in the United States added to the social and private burdens of deprivation, anomie, and pathology. It also deprives the labor-left of a natural constituency among both consumers and producers of public services and drives it to hard bargaining with employers when services such as public health insurance are lacking.

The decline of organized labor, in the workplace and politics, poses grave dangers to American democracy for it is the primary countervailing influence on a society whose leadership grows ever more monolithic, ever more apathetic about distress among the nonrich, and ever more unable to balance its own books or ours.

As Harvard economist Robert B. Reich has put it, this leadership has in effect "seceded" from the union, withdrawing into insulated communities or "cocoons" that shelter them from public concerns; engaging in occupations that manipulate symbols (words, numbers, visual images) and that touch others only as services are needed, calling for better schools but insisting that school funding be shifted from the federal level to the financially strapped cities; and extending their private charity not to public schools or health clinics, but to their own insular use—private universities, museums, opera houses, ballet companies.³ It is a leadership that has abandoned its followers.

The Economic Ledger

The facts from the economic ledger are no secret. The U.S. standard of living between 1972 and 1988 increased only 8 percent, or a fourth of the average gain in West Germany, France, Italy, Britain, and Canada and a seventh as much as in Japan; in 1988, the U.S. standard of living was below West Germany's and scarcely ahead of that of other major countries in Western Europe. The United States is now ninth in per capita gross national product (GNP), behind Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, West Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Japan. Total U.S. national assets rose from \$31 trillion to \$36 trillion between 1985 and 1987, but Japan's rose from \$20 trillion to \$44 trillion.

By 1988, 30–50 percent of the downtown office buildings in such cities as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston were under foreign ownership, and by 1989, the Japanese had funded a third of the corporate buyout boom.⁴ In 1990, foreign banks controlled 23 percent of U.S. banking assets and held 29 percent of U.S. business loans.⁵ The underlying source in the shift of world wealth, as Kevin Phillips points out, was the Reagan administration's need to borrow large sums at high interest

rates to pay for defense buildups, the maintenance of a global military role, the 1981 tax cuts, and the recession spending of the early 1980s.⁶

Largely because of a conservative aversion to public spending on civilian sector growth, U.S. public investments in the nonmilitary domestic economy were skimpy during a recent twenty-year period: 0.3 percent of national output, compared with 1.8 percent in the United Kingdom, 2 percent in France, 2.5 percent in West Germany, and 5.1 percent in Japan.⁷ The absence of a strong labor movement, not its presence, has coincided with this serious erosion of the nation's economy, its world position, and the domestic quality of life.

More important than dollars alone, the United States is lagging in "human development," according to a 1991 UN study, which ranked Japan first, Canada second, and the United States seventh. The United States ranked thirteenth on a UN list of "human freedom" and tenth on a women's equality list. The U.S. murder and rape rates and the proportion of the population in prison were the highest in the world, and the United States was singled out as a major laggard in foreign aid (0.15 percent of gross national product, compared to 1 percent in Scandinavia), with most of the U.S. spending being military aid to Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, and the Philippines.⁸

Political Ecology

It appears that the "political ecology" of our society, and of some similar ones, is seriously out of balance, that predators have grown too big and their appetites too omnivorous, and that their weight threatens to tip the balance of nature in our political life. Although this book is critical of such disturbances of the ecology, it is not antibusiness; it is very much pro-enlightened business and very much in favor of controls over predator behavior that can permit enlightened business of various shapes and sizes to prosper along with everyone else. By and large, the business community is more the victim than the beneficiary of the policies of predators and of unbending conservatism, as the deep recessions of modern times have shown, and the real interests of business are far more congruent with those of labor than tradition permits them to recognize.

