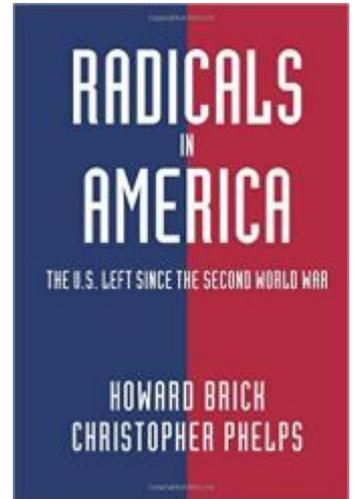


Contemporary American Radicalism: The View from Below

January 12, 2016



Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps. *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left Since the Second World War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 355 pp. Photos. Bibliography. Index.

Howard Brick's and Christopher Phelps' *Radicals in America*, covering the period from 1939 to 2014, is a masterful narrative history of the left of our time, an account that integrates the experience of the post-war left into American political, economic, and social history, with an eye to the cultural context as well.

We have had, of course, dozens of books about the history of the American left, most of them either about the Socialist Party in its heyday in the 1910s or the Communist Party in the 1930s. There are also scores of accounts of one or another of the more recent social movements: the civil rights movement, Students for a Democratic Society, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the women's liberation movement, environmentalism, or the fight for LGBT rights. Now, for the first time, we have a book that presents a comprehensive overview of the U.S. left in all of its manifestations since World War II with a focus on the grassroots of the movements and on often little known organizers. Brick and Phelps have produced a fine history of the left of our time, a book that, unlike so many others, does not suggest that radicals must ally with or become liberals. It is a book that describes and honors radicalism, but which—surprisingly—and perhaps despite the authors' intentions, seems to suggest that there was little possibility for building a successful movement for socialism in the recent past, a view which naturally tends to dim one's hopes for the future.

Other generations produced their own panoramic histories of the left. There are enough studies of the American left to constitute a genre, each book offering a view from its time and its author's perspective. In the Great Depression years, Lillian Symes and Travers Clement produced the comprehensive, beautifully written, and inspiring *Rebel America: The Story of Social Revolt in the United States*, first published in 1934 at the dawning of the mass labor revolt. The Communist Party was just emerging as the leading left organization of the time, and in their conclusion, Symes and Clements offered a sympathetic but critical assessment of its role, suggesting that if it expected to make a revolution the Communist Party needed to adapt itself to American culture and conditions. One might say that the Communists took that advice but went too far in the Popular Front period that began in 1935, becoming a part of the broader radical upsurge but also accommodating to

liberalism and ending up in the Democratic Party.

In the next great upheaval, that of the 1960s, Sidney Lens published his *Radicalism in America* (1966) as both a summing up of the past and as a contribution to the radical movements from labor to peace in which he was personally active. Lens, a former Trotskyist labor organizer, emphasized in his book the role of workers' struggles from below. He appreciated the sudden appearance of the New Left, but criticized it for failing to come up with a "system of ideas" and a strategy to fit the times. He concluded that, bereft of a theory and a program, he was not sure that the New Left had a future. And as it turned out, by and large, it did not, dissipating by the mid-1970s with the end of the Vietnam War and the draft.

There was also another sort of history of radicalism of the "Great Lives" sort so popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Publishing executive Charles A. Madison wrote the stirring *Critics and Crusaders*, published in 1947—just before the onset of the Cold War—and dedicated "To those who cherish freedom, practice equality, and seek justice." His book dealt with the lives of eighteen American idealists and freedom fighters—including two women—in six sections each preceded by a description of the economic, social, and political background at the time. Madison's eighteen heroes were an interesting lot: William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Wendell Phillips, Margaret Fuller, Albert Brisbane, Edward Bellamy, Henry D. Thoreau, Benjamin R. Tucker, Emma Goldman, Henry George, Brooks Adams, Thorstein Veblen, John Peter Altgeld, Lincoln Steffens, Randolph Bourne, Daniel De Leon, Eugene Victor Debs, and John Reed. Wonderfully written and some 534 pages long the book presented not only the biographies but, with a historical introduction to each period, it was a real history of a hundred years of American radicalism.

Ten years later, the enormously popular, leftwing University of Wisconsin professor Harvey Goldberg edited a similar collection of biographies written by several authors titled *American Radicals: Some Problems and Personalities*. Written in the depths of the Cold War and anti-Communist crusade and published in 1957, it also included many excellent essays, among the subjects John Brown, Eugene V. Debs, and Daniel De Leon, as well as the Communist Party Popular Front fellow traveler New York Congressman Vito Marcantonio. But, true to the time, not one woman was included.

Christopher Lasch's *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963, The Intellectual as a Social Type*, published in 1965, dealt not so much with social rebels—though it does discuss a few—as with alienated intellectuals of the middle class and their relationship to American progressivism. As he explained to the reader, he was less interested in politics than in culture. Some of his most fascinating essays deal with women or the role of women in society—Jane Addams, *Woman as Alien*, Mabel Dodge Luhan: *Sex as Politics*—and they are intriguing and insightful. Beginning as a leftist himself, by the end of the 1970s Lasch had begun move to the right, a sad loss to the left.

Histories of American radicalism frequently asked: Where did the left go wrong? And the answer was often: When it went left. By the 1950s broader accounts of the American left were attempting to prove its marginality, its irrelevance. Daniel Bell's *Marxian Socialism in the United States* published in 1952 argued that Marxist dogma made the left marginal.

"At one crucial turning point after another, when the socialist movement could have entered more directly into American life—as did so many individual socialists who played a formative role in liberal political development—it was prevented from doing so by its ideological dogmatism."

The Socialists, Bell argued were "in the world, but not of it;" while the Communists "lived *neither* in the world *nor* of it." The New Left he dismissed (in a 1967 preface) as "moral, not political." For Bell

they were all voices crying in the wilderness and getting lost out there, and, from his point of view, that too was probably for the best.

Not so differently, in 1978 Milton Cantor's *The Divided Left: American Radicalism, 1900-1975*, using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony as its compass, contended that the lack of an historic feudal structure, the American the belief in social mobility and the fluidity of class structure, the democratic and egalitarian ethos, and the two-party system, the country's wealth had made it impossible for the left to establish its hegemony. Cantor, it was clear, had simply brushed off and refurbished the fountain of all theories of the failure of American radicalism, Werner Sombart's *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* first published in 1906. Not only had American exceptionalism made the country immune to socialism, but, Cantor argued, there was nothing the left might have done could have changed things:

“Whether or not radical organizations became sterile sects, descended into irrelevance, engaged in “Mecca watching” [an allusion to Moscow], deteriorated into bureaucratic rigidity—whether or not they became basically reformist or still voiced the opinions of Lenin and looked forward to the Götterdämmerung—it is doubtful that a durable socialist consciousness could have developed.”

Clearly, he thought, it made more sense to be a liberal than a leftist or a radical.

More recent accounts of American radicalism such as Michael Kazin's *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (2011) and Eli Zaretsky's *Why America Needs a Left: A Historical Argument* (2012), learning toward liberalism rather than toward the left, fundamentally agree with the notion that a revolutionary left is impossible in the the United States. Kazin, for example, believes that American radicals generally had most influence when they acted as junior partners of liberal reformers, whether those reformers were the abolitionists working within the Republican Party or the labor activists of the 1930s working within the Democratic Party. Though, Kazin argues, the radicals, though they fail at politics, are often successful in transforming culture and thus influencing politics.

Similarly Zaretsky argues that,

“Without a left, liberalism becomes spineless and vapid; without liberalism, the left becomes sectarian, authoritarian, and marginal. In great eras of reform, the struggle between them strengthens both. Only when the liberal/left dynamic is weak does a strong right emerge.”

For these authors, radicalism can only be meaningful when it is partnered with the American liberal tradition. The logic of the argument then is that independent radicals must not only engage with but must move together with the Democratic Party.

If until now there was one book that was different, it was Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left*, first published in 1987 and reissued in 2013 with a new preface and a new conclusion comprising 50 additional pages. Buhle's book—encyclopedic, optimistic, and idiosyncratic—found the roots of American radicalism in its utopian forbearers and its immigrant socialists, then traced the trunk and branches of left history of America, describing the rise and fall of Socialist, syndicalist, Communist, and New Left organizations to the present day, pointing out and explaining as he proceeded cultural and intellectual developments.

Interested in Marxist theory as much as the left, labor, and social movements, Buhle can enter into a long digression that takes us from the sixteenth century mystic Jakob Böhme, to G.W.F. Hegel at the opening of the nineteenth century, to Marx, and then to C.L.R. James, the Afro-Caribbean Marxist

who is one of his heroes. Alternating between theory and practice, between mass activity and radical thought, and looking for the synergy between them, while describing the series of revolutionary organizations that in one era or another dominated the American scenario, Buhle's book criticized the top-down tendencies, lauded cultural radicalism, and implicitly urged his readers to look for a way to turn the next intellectual insight or cultural development into a new movement, and to derive from the next movement new theoretical understandings. Where in the past there was hope in the labor movement, and later in the Black and women's movements, Buhle came to find hope in the twenty-first century in the new environmentalism and in Occupy.

Radicalism in America, with its emphasis on the grassroots activism of the social movements, is quite unlike all of its forerunners. Brick, Louis Evans Professor of History at the University of Michigan, and Phelps, professor of American History at the University of Nottingham, have given us an altogether different interpretation. They do not see the left's existence and significance as depending on liberals. They do not place at the center of their book either left political organizations, such as the Communist Party or the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), nor the influential institutions created in the post-war period such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) or the National Organization for Women (NOW).

They do mention leading figures of left, but their focus is not on the leaders or intellectuals. The heroes of this book are not Socialists or Communists, Trotskyists or Maoists, not religious activists or pacifists—though all have their place in the story. The protagonist of their history is the radical—or better put, the radicals collectively—who may or may not be members of one of the leftist parties but they can almost always be found in the social movements. They are the people whose critical spirit and willingness to challenge the system—even at the risk of being scorned, fired, spat upon, beaten, jailed, or possibly killed—succeeds decade after decade in inspiring new mass movements implicitly aiming for another sort of society with greater freedom, equality, democracy, and solidarity.

Brick and Phelps, who have read virtually everything about the left and radical movements of this period, from contemporary periodicals to the academic literature, have included not only leftist parties but also the groups too often neglected in radical histories: the feminists, LGBT activists, and environmentalist radicals. They weave the stories of American radicals into a dense, but highly readable and fast paced book.

The axis of Brick's and Phelps' book is the tension between the radicals as marginal, minority groups often disdained by society who, at the same time, strive, principally through democratic means, to organize the solidarity that would create a new majority. The radicals always live "oscillating" between margin and mainstream, between militant minority and the upheaval of the masses. When the stars align—that is, when political and economic conditions are right—the radical minorities can set mass movements in motion, but, when the stars are crossed, radicals become persecuted—or, even worse, ignored minorities on the fringes of society, until their creativity and their persistence bring them back once again to the center of a movement. In the period from 1939 to 2014, Brick and Phelps argue, radicals—though their most radical visions often receded into the distance as they advanced—were nonetheless often the driving forces of significant reform.

Unlike, say, Buhle's history, this book does not spend much time on leftist political theory, though it is not ignorant of it. The authors' point of view is close to that of the "Third Camp" or "socialism-from-below" perspective of groups such as the Campaign for Peace and Democracy (CPD) and the journal *New Politics* (of which I am a co-editor). While describing the radical movements they admire, they do not hesitate to criticize the "opportunism" of the CPUSA in the Popular Front period, the "sectarianism" of the anti-Stalinist and pacifist left in 1940s or the elitism and destructiveness of the Weathermen, nor do they fail to condemn the "liberal hawks" writing for

Dissent in the 2000s or to show their contempt for “neo-Stalinist sects” like the Workers World Party (WWP).

The critical and profoundly democratic perspective of this book must be applauded, and its attention to the humble organizers and lowly beginnings of what later became mass movements deserves praise. The heroes of this book—even when they are members of a left organization—are independent-minded activists who were the first to speak out against racism in the military when the dominant left tended to be patriotic; the first to risk their lives to take on the issue of civil rights for Blacks when racism was overt, violent, and deadly; the first to organize rank-and-file workers to challenge ossified labor bureaucracies even when it meant challenging the Mafia in the Teamsters or the self-styled socialist leadership of the United Auto Workers; the first to defend gay rights when nearly every gay man or lesbian woman was in the closet; the first to talk about the health of the planet when most in the country believed in “better living through chemistry.” There are people like Harry Hay and Dale Jennings who, expelled from the CPUSA for being gay, established the Mattachine Foundation, a forerunner of the LGBT liberation movement. There is the chapter Mothers for Peace that founded the Abalone Alliance to fight the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Reactor. There are Marty Robinson, Michael Petrelis, and Larry Kramer who founded the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). And there are dozens of others who in some small town or big city neighborhood organized a meeting and held a demonstration that launched a movement, changed the times, and often won reforms.

In each period it covers, their book clarifies the debates between different leaders and groups in the various movements, whether SDS in the 1960s or the environmentalists in the 1990s. The authors’ characterizations of the various periods and their judgments about the significance of various left movements seem right to me; for example, when they write “Of all the breakthrough movements of 1968-69, women’s liberation had perhaps the deepest, most lasting effect on American life” (p. 157).

Yet one wants more. Perhaps because this book is such a detailed, dense and fast-paced narrative of radicalism in the United States, the authors could not pause to ponder the possibility of socialism in America. Though informed by a radical sensibility, this book does not project any possibility of revolutionary change either in the period it covers or does it imply any such change might develop in the future. The authors do touch on revolutionary socialism in their chapter “The Revolution Will Be Live, 1967-1973,” and in a few pages dealing with the anti-Vietnam War movement, SDS, and the Black Panthers make some interesting and insightful one-line observations, concluding that, “This revolutionary hopefulness produced many searching and creative innovations that would reshape American culture, although in some insurrectionary fantasies or apocalyptic visions it took on surreal qualities.” Absolutely true, but not the fuller discussion that one yearns for at that point in the story.

Developing economic and political conditions, we learn, created opportunities seized upon by radicals who were sometime able to bring about progressive change and, at other times, failed, either because of the economic strength of the system, government repression, or “the proverbial circular firing squad” exemplified in groups such as the Weathermen or tactics such as the Black Bloc. Radicalism, the authors make clear, has been significant because it has changed the attitudes of Americans about such issues as black people’s civil rights, LGBT rights and the environment, and because it has led to all sorts of reforms of American capitalism, from Food Stamp programs to the Americans for Disabilities Act.

Brick and Phelps recognize and praise the radicals for the reforms that they brought about, reforms that improved American society. But they do not ask if these radical movements might have contributed to the building of a socialist society. And, true, it is hard to imagine. While the post-war era with which they deal saw twenty years of uninterrupted social upheaval from the beginnings of

the civil rights movement in 1956 to the end of most of the large social movements in 1975, from the 1980s until today the social and political scene has become increasingly conservative. Throughout the post-war era, capitalism and bureaucratic Communism, two equally exploitative and oppressive systems, divided the world. Then came the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, accompanied by the victory of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism around the world. Communist China turned from totalitarian bureaucratic Communism into a ruthless state capitalist country, still devoid of democratic rights, while the Social Democratic parties in Europe became the administrators of neoliberalism. In the United States the Republicans and Democrats moved together to the right, accepting the free market ideal, attacking social welfare and imposing austerity. Certainly the global situation has grown increasingly difficult for radicals and socialists.

Yet still one wants to ask what might have been done, both in the 20-year period of social turmoil and the in more conservative aftermath, to posit a general, societal alternative. The radicals who fought for and won reforms also often envisioned a democratic socialist socialism, and some remained true to that cause. Others either gave up the fight for socialism or turned toward Democratic Party liberalism and were carried rightward with the mainstream. How and why did some radicals either give up or fail to envision a socialist alternative, to develop a socialist program, and to build an independent socialist movement?

To be a revolutionary is to hold a political posture that rejects capitalist society and demands the creation of a society where all democratically control both government and the economy. Were there in the post-war period opportunities to develop those ideas, to organize for them, and to begin to establish a socialist movement? Certainly the upheaval of the 1950s-1970s, the late-1990s global justice movement, and Occupy Wall Street all implicitly raised that issue, but this question of the road not taken is only just touched on in Brick's and Phelps' story.

One might imagine another book on American radicalism reorganized not around the sporadic radical upheavals that won reforms, but around the axis of a series of movements that challenged the capitalist system and implicitly or explicitly posed the alternative of a democratic socialist society. Such a book would ask us to attempt—and this is no easy task—to draw the lessons of the mass movements, and to draw them together into a kind of political vision and a rough approximation of a program for the future, as well as suggesting the strategies that could put revolution—that is, the revamping of society to the benefit of all exploited and oppressed people—on the agenda. Perhaps the authors—who do so well in providing us a history of American radicalism in this book—will offer us an analysis of the failure of socialism in the past and a vision of socialism and a strategy for the future in another book.

That said, Brick's and Phelps' *Radicals in America* will certainly become a standard history of the post-war American left, sure to be widely used in classrooms, to be dog-eared and underlined by radicals and stuffed into their crammed bookshelves, next to Lens and Buhle, and to be consulted in libraries. It will help today's radicals to locate themselves in the trajectory of American radicalism and offers all of us the socialism-from-below perspective that defies all undemocratic regimes and challenges us to create a truly democratic society.