

Introduction

The full history of the American Left has yet to be unearthed, let alone written. Perhaps the greatest single obstacle to such a project has been the inability of scholars to utilize the wealth of material generated by immigrants whose daily language and intellectual discourse were not in English. Indeed, with a handful of exceptions, histories of leftist currents among these groups remain unwritten. *The Immigrant Left in the United States* provides preliminary studies of groups never analyzed in this context and seeks to revise and elaborate histories of groups with considerable documentation. It also suggests the scope and nature of research yet to be undertaken.¹

Study of the immigrant Left is far from new. As early as 1911, veteran German-American socialist editor Hermann Schlüter's volume, *Die International in Amerika: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Arbeiter-Bewegung in den Vereinigten Staaten* [The International in America, a Contribution to the History of the Workers' Movement in the U.S.], was published in Chicago. This important monograph, which examined the first wave of immigrant socialism, was followed by a handful of books, nearly all in Yiddish, published by leftist and fraternal groups to commemorate their movements' pioneers.² English-language historians of American radicalism, never numerous until the 1960s, generally took little notice of such volumes or of the movements that produced them. Because the emerging scholarship directed attention almost entirely toward English-language radicalism and the famous personalities of the Left, it tended simply to bypass subjects that required both lan-

guage skills and a particular expertise in specific immigrant cultures.³

This neglect persisted until the 1970s. By that time, labor and social historians such as Herbert G. Gutman had revitalized social history by looking directly at the everyday life of the American masses, immigrants emphatically included.⁴ Although they had limited language tools themselves and less interest in the Left than in the working class per se, their methods and their sensitivity had an enormous impact upon younger graduate students interested in radical history. These students, including many second- or third-generation immigrant descendents eager to uncover the "hidden history" of their specific cultural tradition, meanwhile drew strength from other developments.⁵ Major research repositories, most notably the Immigration History Research Center in Minnesota, aggressively collected, categorized, and made available materials from a wide spectrum of ethnic groups. Diaspora studies, increasingly popular in the home nations of the emigrants who had left for America, added considerably to the resources of the combined archival effort.⁶

The political climate of the 1960s and 1970s also fed the new ethnic and radical scholarship. Interest in various ethnic histories proved a natural corollary to the drive to recover black history (or "roots"). Fortunately, as various social movements of the period began to lose their momentum, many talented former activists undertook work in public history. They often sought out the aging veterans of earlier radical movements. Such individuals, eager for historical vindication after the trials of McCarthyism and decades of forgetfulness, eagerly spoke about their past and personally donated a large body of hitherto inaccessible material, published and unpublished.

The interaction of radical generations produced a rich flow of public forums, documentary films, oral histories, museum exhibits, memorial meetings, and scholarly volumes. Among the archival projects most significant in the recovery of immigrant history, the Oral History of the American Left (housed at New York University's Tamiment Library) taped, collected, and catalogued hundreds of interviews, stirring still more veterans to write their memoirs or to collect material from their own circles.⁷ The documentation resulting from all these activities not only filled in categories for sympathetic scholars but actually reorganized categories, as the insights of research were modified by the voices of those who had experienced events first hand. That more and more new books showed real insight into the lives of ordinary radicals

was, perhaps, the greatest of tributes to the footwork of a generation.

By the 1990s, most veterans of the movements that had reached their peak in the New Deal and World War II eras had passed from the scene, and the young scholars of the 1960s had themselves become middle-aged. Social history meanwhile suffered a certain loss of prestige; academic interest in European immigration and the industrial working class declined significantly. The memoirs so recently published now seemed to recall a time long past. Although serious research on earlier immigrants and colonized cultures such as Mexicans, Native Americans, and Puerto Ricans continued, more attention began to be directed toward groups whose immigration patterns were linked to the momentous 1965 revision of immigration laws, a revision that opened the doors to groups previously discouraged or excluded from entry in large numbers into the United States.

Most of the new immigrants came from Latin America, Asia, and, to a lesser degree, the Middle East. If they faced a more complex America than their predecessors had, they also confronted many of the same conditions, from sweatshops to discrimination based on racist assumptions. Sooner or later—sooner in many cases—the new immigrants organized to make demands on their adopted nation and on an ethnic hierarchy, which now sometimes privileged ethnic groups such as eastern or southern Europeans considered inferior only a generation or two earlier.

These newcomers also frequently came from lands gripped by social upheaval related to the collapse of the governing system in Russia and the reverberations as far away as Asia and Latin America. Most obviously in the case of the Haitians but in many other cases as well, immigrants and their American-based organizations were also certain to play an influential role in the immediate fate of the homeland. These developments represented a reprise of sorts for familiar paradigms, the Haitians behaving, for instance, much like turn-of-the-century Cubans who had organized revolutionary and support movements from Florida strongholds. Filipinos, Iranian and South Korean students, Puerto Ricans, and many others had occupied in recent decades or would now certainly occupy a similar status. Various immigrant Lefts also asserted themselves—sometimes loudly and in the name of their own politics but usually more quietly, under a broader rubric—within U.S. labor, liberal, and civil rights coalitions. Once more, like their predecessors, activists found class and ethnic issues

inextricably entangled with language, race, gender, and religious concerns.

Seen in this way, a large narrative commencing with the arrival of German radicals during the Civil War era and continuing on to the present exhibits remarkable continuity and equally remarkable paradoxes. Social patterns recurred in very different populations, even as the confidence of the Left in their (and its own) ultimate destiny has flagged. If Marxists—traditionally the most systematic thinkers of the immigrant Left—invariably anticipated that early patterns of social disorder and eclectic dissent would grow into a cohesive socialist vanguard, today's interpreters understandably foreswear any definitive "before" and "after." If rather than becoming more dysfunctional in its own terms, capitalism seems instead to increase its mastery of planetary resources even while despoiling them, then ethnically specific working classes are forever newly produced out of groups of impoverished emigrants fleeing their homes for cities or a new land. Rather than producing a happy ending in a world consumer society, capitalism continually reproduces differentiations and degradations at its commercial and industrial centers, with no end necessarily in sight. Exploitation and great suffering may be safely predicted, while alternatives seem more elusive than they did a half century or century ago.

The essays presented in this collection reflect, in some ways, the exhaustion of traditional Left perspectives. But they also challenge the traditional scholarship of immigrant life, which assumes upward mobility and inevitable assimilation. Neither of these theoretical models—each suited in its own way to the European immigrant experience—fits the actual experience of most groups past or present. Economic success no more demonstrates cultural vitality, for instance, than a lack of upward mobility reveals some defective quality in specific cultures. The rags-to-riches myth suffers further from the general perception of the mid-1990s that ordinary Americans are less and less likely to live as well as (let alone better than) their parents. Assimilation has also become increasingly problematic. Spanish-speaking cultures, some of which preexisted what is now the United States, can hardly be said to have become assimilated or to present the prospect of doing so. Public controversies over "multiculturalism" and "English-first" reflect a deep uneasiness about the day-to-day conditions of life in a society where the traditional sources of cohesion have evidently worn thin.

All this is not to deny that some groups have fared, and will doubtless continue to fare, better than others. Nor is it to deny the

more paradoxical prospect that Left mobilizations may very well take shape in the middle rather than the poorest range of immigrant culture (as they have also tended to do in the past). Germans were surely more fortunate than Italians at the opening of the twentieth century and natives of Trinidad or Hong Kong more fortunate than Filipinos or Salvadorans at century's end. Each group has its own unique historical situation and its own cards to play; the Left often makes an important contribution to how the hand dealt is actually used.

The relatively recent appearance of a "transnational" field or approach casts new light upon the experience of immigrants. As early as the 1910s, Randolph Bourne had described "Trans-National America" in place of the melting pot, and the precocious revolutionary intellectual Louis C. Fraina described a "new racial type" destined to arise from the mixing of Old and New Worlds.⁸ But only with the steady advance of business globalization and fresh currents of immigration did leading scholars begin to turn away from the sturdy myths of "American exceptionalism" to a picture always more complex in real life. Ongoing developments such as the ecological crisis are global in nature and seem certain to intensify the turn toward a transnational perspective.⁹

That said, little of the transnationalist discussion thus far has been historical in character, and still less has concerned the subject at hand. Labor history, which long suffered from the generalization that American workers were so "unique" as to defy (European) Marxist models of behavior, has only recently begun to recover from the narrowness of "exceptionalism," the idea of America as a nation entirely different from others.¹⁰ Social scientists exploring similar territory conclude erroneously but similarly that the contemporary experience of post-1965 immigration is likewise utterly distinct from everything preceding it.¹¹

The promise of transnationalism, for this book's subject in particular, is thus unfulfilled. Indeed, basic definitions have yet to be laid out. Historical judgments on the impact of immigrant Lefts within their communities and the nation (or world) at large are inevitably constrained and compromised by an uneven historiographical landscape.

Where documentation is substantial, as in the case of Germans and Jews, broad overviews can be devised and intertextual observations made about past scholarship. From the complex history of Mexican-Americans to the intense case of Jewish garment workers, studies here plumb forgotten, distorted, neglected, and once con-

troversial moments of ethnic experience. More commonly, however, no full-length study has been published. Even such relatively large ethnic groups as Italians, Irish, and Poles, let alone such smaller but significant groups as Armenians, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Latvians, non-Jewish (or assimilated Jewish) Russians, Bulgarians, West Indians (French-Creole-, or English-speaking), Portuguese, Filipinos, or French-Canadians have yet to find their ethnic Left major scholars. Work has only begun or remains mostly in unpublished sources on south Slavs (Croats, Slovenes, Serbs), Swedes and Norwegians, Ukrainians, Arabs, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and a variety of Asian groups.

The essays in this volume are the first known to focus on radicalism along immigrant Poles, Ukrainians, Haitians, Arabs, and Greeks. They likewise make an opening effort to comprehend "transnational" experience, the transatlantic or transpacific political dialogue, which played a key role in immigrant life but which scholars have so rarely grappled with hitherto. They push the limits of existing scholarship by seeking to provide an overview of scattered studies in so large a conceptual area as Asian immigration. And they seek, in some cases, to comprehend the little understood role of first- and second-generation immigrants in American letters and American popular culture. Despite the limitations of existing available data and the incapacity of any one volume to encompass so vast and complex a subject as the immigrant Left, these essays collectively challenge the standard accounts of immigrant life and indicate where future research may fruitfully be directed.

—Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas

Notes

1. The best available resource for overviews and further suggestions for reading is the *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (New York, 1990), edited by Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas. A complete bibliography of material on the immigrant Left, written in various nations and in various languages, would be impossible to compile at this date. The second edition of the *Encyclopedia* (projected for 1997) will, however, contain an updated and thorough survey of recent scholarly advances.

2. Hermann Schlüter's history of the First International in the U.S., *Die Internationale in Amerika* (Chicago, 1918), was characteris-

tically published by the *Deutsche Sprachgruppe der Sozialistische Partei der Vereinigten Staaten* [German Language group of the Socialist Party of the U.S.]. Of later histories, perhaps the most outstanding are A. Sh. Sachs, *Di Geshikhte fun Arbeter Ring* 2 vols. (New York, 1925), published by the Workmen's Circle; Kalmon Marmor, *Moris Vinchefsky, Zeyn Lebn un Verk* (New York, 1928) (volume 1, a close study of the Yiddish socialist editor described at length in Paul Buhle's essay below, was published by the communist *Morgn Freiheit*); *Dovid Edelshtott Gedenk-Bukh* (Los Angeles, 1952), a collection of anarchist memoirs about the late nineteenth-century Yiddish poet and editor; *Geshikhte fun der tsienistisher arbeter vavegung in Tsofen Amerike* (New York, 1955), a two-volume history of labor Zionism; and the survey of the Yiddish-language socialist movement, J. S. Hertz, *Di Yiddishe Sozialistishte Bevegung in Amerike* (New York, 1954).

In addition to these sources, the memoir literature of individual Yiddish-language anarchist, socialist, and communist veterans is sizable, published in small editions and financed by "publication committees" of the authors' friends. A far larger Yiddish scholarship on Left-tinged Yiddish fiction, theatrical, and poetry writers exists. Fictional treatments of the Yiddish-language Left are also plentiful, especially in short fiction.

3. The major exception to this rule is Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the United States* (New York, 1950), written by a former staff member of the Yiddish communist *Morgn Freiheit* newspaper. Theodore Draper's *Roots of American Communism* (New York, 1957) and his *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York, 1960) showed a passing familiarity with a number of Left language groups, but little understanding of their unique character and little real interest beyond the leadership decision making in each group.

It is striking, furthermore, how equally distant the once standard communist and anticommunist histories are from the immigrant experience: William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party, USA* (New York, 1952) and Lewis Coser and Irving Howe, *The American Communist Party, 1919–1957, a Critical History* (New York, 1958) evidence little interest in the ethnic-cultural element of the Left, let alone its worldview. Studies published decades later, which, however, remain stolidly in the traditional vein, such as Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (New York, 1984), seem likewise oblivious to virtually all developments in this field even now, with a variety of primary and secondary materials

abundantly available. James Weinstein's *Decline of Socialism in America, 1912–1924* (New York, 1967) is remarkable, in this respect, mainly for its listing of ethnic socialist newspapers and their circulation, and for the author's frank suggestion that more research on the immigrant groups was badly needed.

4. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1976) collects his massively influential essays. Gutman himself was called before a Congressional investigating committee to explain his life as a former counselor at a left-wing summer camp with a Yiddish emphasis. A posthumous second collection, *Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York, 1987), edited by Ira Berlin, offers a broader selection with a sensitive introduction by the editor, noting Gutman's effort to address the questions of class hegemony as well as those of history "from the bottom up."

5. A short list of outstanding works on the immigrant Left from this generation would include first of all, several major collections on German-Americans, such as Hartmut Keil, ed., *German Workers' Culture in the United States, 1850–1920* (Washington, D.C., 1988); Bruce C. Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870–1900* (New Brunswick, 1988); and James Dankey et al., eds., *The German American Radical Press* (Urbana, 1990). It would also include Michael G. Karni and Douglas J. Ollila, Jr., eds., *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America* (Superior, Wisconsin, 1977); the more eclectic collection, Dirk Hoerder, ed., "*Struggle a Hard Battle*": *Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (DeKalb, 1986); and volumes with important sections on the immigrant Left, such as Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, 1982) and Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States* (London, 1991 edition).

The following, post-1960s generation of historians has produced many case study labor histories with important Left ethnic sidelights, such as Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany, 1989), and Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860–1912* (Urbana, 1993). Unfortunately, in most cases the immigrant material was examined secondhand, through English-language sources only.

6. Beyond the Immigration History Research Center (at the University of Minnesota), the reader is directed to the YIVO

Institute Library, New York City, for Jewish materials; the Minnesota Historical Society for Scandinavian and Finnish materials; the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for the Socialist Labor Party papers; and the Cornell University Library for the papers of the International Workers Order and other relevant collections. Scattered libraries have individual collections of great value, but not even those with considerable collections of English-language Left archives are likely to have significant non-English-language materials. The U.S.-related materials in non-U.S. libraries have yet to be assessed, but consist mainly in complete runs of serials produced within the U.S. by groups from the particular nation or culture.

7. A published *Guide* is available from the Tamiment Collection, Bobst Library, New York University, including outtake footage from some of the outstanding documentary films of the 1970s–1980s covering immigrant Left subjects.

8. Randolph Bourne, "Trans-National America," in Bourne, *The History of a Literary Radical and Other Papers* edited by Van Wyck Brooks, (New York, 1956), 283; Louis C. Faina, "Literary Gleanings: The Chasm," *Daily People*, April 9, 1911.

9. See the discussion in the *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991): Ian Tyrrell, "American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History," 1031–55; McGerr, "The Price of the 'New Transnational History,'" 1056–67; and "Ian Tyrrell Responds," 1068–72. Unfortunately, far too much of this discussion hinges upon redefinitions of "exceptionalism," in large part because "transnationalism" is more concept than practice in scholarship as yet.

10. See Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984); 1–24, along with the accompanying comments by Nick Salvatore and Michael Hanagan, 26–36; and Steven Sapolsky, "Response to Sean Wilentz's 'Against Exceptional: Class and the American Labor Movement, 1790 to 1920,'" *ibid.* 27 (Spring 1985); 35–38.

11. See *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration*, edited by N. G. Schiller et.al. (New York, 1992), in which the "Old Migration" becomes a straw man, utterly irrelevant to post-1965 trends except as contrast.