# Which Way to Emancipation?
# Race and Ethnicity in American Socialist Thought, 1876-1899

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*To Marta*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates socialist ideas of race and ethnicity in the US during the Gilded Age. By charting the attempts of the Socialist Labor Party to defend the economic and social rights of racial minorities such as African Americans, Chinese immigrants, and Native Americans, it explores the tension between the struggle for class emancipation on the one hand and the demand for racial equality on the other. Focusing on a group of little-investigated newspaper sources, in many cases involving new translations from German-language local socialist press, this thesis challenges the idea held by many historians of American radicalism that late-nineteenth century socialists were apparently uninterested in race. On the contrary, American socialists of the Gilded Age actively engaged with the specific interracial and inter-ethnic composition of the US working class. Applying both methods of institutional and intellectual history, this thesis argues that the Socialist Labor Party between 1876-1899 was divided into two main areas of opinion: the first, defined in this work as "colour-blind internationalist," held that class solidarity – rather than race and ethnicity – should be used to unite workers and fight for their rights. The second, here termed "scientific racialist," used a variety of intellectual approaches, which spanned from pseudo-scientific theories of race to Darwinism and anthropology, to demonstrate the existence of a hierarchy of human groups with different levels of physical, cultural, and social development. From the late 1870s to the end of the 1880s the scientific racialist position was prominent in the Socialist Labor Party, but was contested by colour-blind assertions. Indeed, when Daniel De Leon became the party's leader in the 1890s, he imposed colour-blind socialism as the sole approach. This moved American socialism away from anti-egalitarian outlooks, but created a blind spot in which socialists stopped recognising race as a key element that shaped the social dynamics of the country – a situation that made it hard for them to successfully implement anti-racist policies. This, in turn, helps to explain the relative historic weakness of socialism in the US.

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I am not overstating anything if I say that concluding this thesis would not have been possible without the constant comfort of the many friends I have met in Nottingham. The PGR office of the American and Canadian Studies Department has provided the ideal balance between a productive working environment (if you wear headphones, at least…) and a welcoming ambient of mutual confrontation and reciprocal support. We started playing Scrabble in the basement with Bart and Martin, we finished drinking coffees by the First Floor entrance with Jimmy and Steve. People and places may have changed, but not the idea of having fun while struggling to pull our theses together. In the Italian community of Nottingham I met people like Mattia, Riccardo, Carlo, Rossella, Pietro, Emma, Alessandra, Raffaella and many others that I now consider my local family. Like a proper immigrant

community, our gradual integration in the British society has gone in parallel with a constant process of mutual support and reciprocal confrontation – a circumstance that has made things so much easier. I was lucky enough to come across other people with whom I share interests and values, such as Sia, the best sports mate and philosophy converser I could hope for, or Steven, a colleague and a friend to whom I was introduced in the most absurd circumstances. I conclude by mentioning Alex and Tom, who not only have provided feedback countless times on every single draft of every single chapter of this thesis, but with whom I have shared every single aspect of my life in Nottingham for the past four years. Your support has been frankly invaluable.

Academic life, with its routine made of papers, chapter drafts, seminars, lectures, conferences and so on can be quite incomprehensible to people who are not part of it. If you add the complication deriving from living in another country and meeting each other far too rarely, then trying to convey what your situation is can become a very complicated task, even when you are talking to the people you have spent your previous twenty-five years of life with. Despite my vague and inadequate descriptions, however, my family in Italy have been an unstoppable source of support and encouragement in these years. Every time I went back I knew I would find the same welcoming and rich environment of personal relations that helped me to keep going in so many occasions. The same can be said for my Italian friends, the few who are still in Genoa, Turin and elsewhere in Italy and the many who have moved abroad. There was a time when we thought we would never move out from our town, let alone our country or our continent. Things have gone differently… Our ability to keep our relations alive despite all proves how strong the bonds between us are.

This thesis is dedicated to Marta, because without her nothing of this would have made any sense.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AFL | American Federation of Labor |
| GLP | Greenback-Labor Party |
| ILU | International Labor Union |
| IWMA | International Workingmen's Association |
| NLU | National Labor Union |
| SLP | Socialist Labor Party |
| SPA | Socialist Party of America |
| STLA | Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance |
| WPC | Workingmen's Party of California |
| WPI | Workingmen's Party of Illinois |
| WPUS | Workingmen's Party of the United States |

# INTRODUCTION:
# A RACIALISED HISTORY OF THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN SOCIALISM

In 1877 Robert Mills, a correspondent of the *Volksstimme des Westens*, the St. Louis-based daily of the socialist Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS), opened an article with the assertion that "the United States population is a conglomerate of different races, and is composed of people coming virtually from all over the world." Such inter-mixing, continued the journalist, created "extraordinary circumstances," such as "an Indian question, a Negro question and, in more recent times, a Chinese question." Mills' piece went on to discuss the impact of this diversity on the "white race," which, the article suggested, had produced the superior "Caucasic culture." Mills maintained that white workers had little to fear from Native Americans and blacks, because both were vanishing races. In contrast, Chinese immigrants were deemed to be more problematic. The article expounded the stereotypical idea that they were part of a distinctively productive and efficient race, and could therefore successfully compete with white workers on the job market. If St. Louis labourers wanted to defend themselves from Chinese immigrants, concluded the *Volksstimme* correspondent, they needed to join the WPUS, the only party that would quickly end the "Chinese Question."[1]

Just a few months earlier on the east coast, in New York, the capital of the US industrial revolution, the official national organ of the WPUS, the *Labor Standard*, had published a speech that the editor of the paper Joseph P. McDonnell had delivered during the great strike of July 1877:

[1] Robert Mills, "Die Indianer, Neger und Chinesen in Nord-Amerika," *Volksstimme des Westens*, November 2, 1877. [Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German are my own.]

> It was a great sight to see in West Virginia, white and colored men standing together, men of all nationalities in one supreme contest for the common rights of workingmen. *(Loud cheers)* The barriers of ignorance and prejudice were fast falling before the growing intelligence of the masses. Hereafter there shall be no north, no south, no east, no west, only one land of labor and the workingmen must own and possess it.[2]

This colour-blind celebration of workers' solidarity contrasted sharply with the point of view upheld in the *Volksstimme*. The St. Louis German American daily had based its analysis on overt racialised essentialism: social and cultural features such as efficiency and productivity for Chinese immigrants were attributed to different human groups according to their race. In a Darwinian struggle for existence, races competed with one another, and socialists were called upon to defend their own group from the assault of others. In contrast, McDonnell praised the (ephemeral) impression that racial prejudice was disappearing and that workers would finally unite beyond divisions of race and nationality.

This stark divergence of viewpoints among socialists mirrored genuine differences of strategic and moral opinion in the American working class of that time, with its yawning class and racial divisions. The ways in which the American socialist movement responded to these differences of opinion concerning class and race form the subject of this thesis. During the Gilded Age, white American and immigrant workers found themselves facing questions about whether class equality and racial equality could go hand in hand. Was forging interracial solidarity compatible with their stated goals of improving the condition of the working class? The rapid industrialisation of the US, which placed the country amongst the

[2] "The great meeting. The organized workingmen of New York throng the Great Hall of the Cooper Union," *Labor Standard*, August 4, 1877.

richest nations in the world by the end of the century, produced striking social inequalities. The wealth produced in this period of prosperity went mostly to the business class, with the result that by 1890 the richest one per cent of the American population received the same total income as the bottom half of it, and the same one per cent owned more property than the other 99 per cent combined.[3] American radical movements and labour organisations campaigned to change this situation and improve the conditions of the working class. In many cases their political actions were directed against the shortcomings of the American democratic system, the corruption of politics, and class exploitation. Crucially, however, the American working class was far from united in its political objectives. Workers were divided not only according to different levels of expertise (i.e. skilled versus unskilled), but also along lines of race, ethnicity, and gender. Employers emphasised and utilised these divisions in order to play workers against each other, a method which historians have described as "racial capitalism."[4]

Post-Civil War America presented an ideal context for the diffusion of "racial capitalism." With the abolition of chattel slavery, four million African Americans had swelled the ranks of the ostensibly free American working class – even if they remained largely located in the rural South and often in forms of contractual labour that were to all intents and purposes unfree. Additionally, immigration from China and Europe intensified significantly, adding new disparities to a society which was already characterised by the presence of Native American enclaves in the Midwest and West and Mexican-American communities in the South-western territories. Thus, the main problem faced by Gilded Age

[3] Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & C., 2014), 601-602; general surveys of the Gilded Age include: Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Rebecca Edwards, *New Spirits: Americans in the Gilded Age, 1865-1905* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007).

[4] Cedric J. Robinson defined the phrase "racial capitalism" in *Black Marxism: the Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 2-3.

labour activists and radicals was how to organise this highly variegated working class that, while it may well have shared the common goal of improving its social and economic conditions, also faced profoundly different situations and problems.[5]

Labour organisations had varied reactions to the issues posed by the increasing racial diversity and the flourishing of white supremacist ideologies as the predominant response to it. Some, like the American Federation of Labor, largely ignored it, preferring instead to emphasise the division between skilled and unskilled workers and to look for agreements with employers with the objective of protecting small groups of skilled – and virtually all white – workers. Others, like the Knights of Labor, adopted a policy of inclusivity based on producerist conceptions of citizenship. The Knights believed that workers (white and black alike) could improve their condition as long as they managed to reacquire their economic independence and overthrow "wage slavery." The organisation included women and virtually everyone regardless of race – an approach that was remarkably egalitarian for its day – with the only exception being Chinese workers. Yet despite the internal inclusivity of the Knights, race discrimination in the wider society was only tackled directly by African American organisations such as the Afro-American League and the National Afro-American council, as recently reconstructed by Shawn Leigh Alexander.[6]

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[5] On African Americans, cf. Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); *The Black Worker: Race, Labor, and Civil Rights Since Emancipation*, ed. Eric Arnesen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South*, ed. Bruce Baker and Brian Kelly (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013). On Chinese immigration: Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy and the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 36-59.

[6] On the American Federation of Labor, historian Philip S. Foner has documented the early attempts of its leadership to create interracial unity, which failed when the AFL decided to focus exclusively on skilled workers: cf. Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), 2:195-204; Julie Green, *Pure and Simple Politics: the American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: the Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Joseph Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2007); Shawn Leigh Alexander, *An Army of Lions: the Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

The end of Reconstruction coincided with the foundation of the first national party with a socialist programme ever born on American soil. Socialist activists convened in Philadelphia in 1876 and fused four different socialist groups into the Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS), a name that was changed to the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) one year later.[7] In addition to carrying out their own party's electoral and educational activity, SLP members were highly active in labour unions, including both AFL and Knights of Labor affiliates, and in other political and social movements in the period. Scholars have contended that, despite the SLP's intention to organise workers beyond lines of race and nationality, it was almost completely unable to overcome the racial prejudices of its own members.[8] How was this possible? Was the SLP, like the broader labour movement, blind to the problems of racial minorities? If that was the case, then why? Was it because of the class fixations of socialism – in other words, was nineteenth-century socialism theoretically unable to address the problem of racial diversity?

This thesis is the first intellectual history of race and ethnicity in the late nineteenth-century American socialist movement. By examining Gilded Age debates in the English-language and German-language socialist press, it aims to answer these questions and to shed new light on the intertwined relationship between race discrimination and class inequality in the late nineteenth century United States. The Socialist Labor Party, as one of the few labour organisations in the country to put class at the heart of its political action, offers a distinctive and important angle of approach to undertake this reconstruction of intellectual history. As suggested by labour historian David Montgomery, socialists utilised an approach that differed from that of the "mainstream of the post-Civil War labour movement:" whereas the leaders of

[7] Philip S. Foner, *The Formation of the Workingmen's Party of the United States: Proceedings of the Union Congress Held at Philadelphia, July 19-22, 1876* (New York: American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1876); Socialistic Labor Party, *Platform, Constitution, and Resolutions, Adopted at the National Congress of the Workingmen's Party of the United States, held at Newark (N.J.), December 26. 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 1877* (Cincinnati: Ohio Volks-Zeitung Print, 1878).
[8] Cf. especially Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 60.

labour organisations like the Knights of Labor advocated anti-monopolism and individualist self-emancipation, or craft unity in the case of the AFL, socialists focused on class struggle as the key strategic means by which actively to obtain political power and hence promote radical changes in economic and social relations. Nineteenth-century socialist movements had an on-going internal conversation about the problem of race diversity and the impact it should have on a socialist program. Reconstructing this debate helps to better understand the history of the left in the US and sheds new light on the unfolding relationship between socialist theory and the issue of race diversity in the US. In contrast to the historiographical consensus on the evasion of race in the socialist movement, I argue that the debate on race and class in the SLP was, in fact, one of the first occasions in which a socialist organisation confronted the problem of racial discrimination and tried to develop adequate measures to tackle it.[9]

This thesis is based on the premise that in order to better understand the intersections between socialism and racial diversity in America's Gilded Age, it is necessary to turn our gaze on the group of German immigrants that founded and animated the Socialist Labor Party during its first years of existence. Scholars have been quick to stress the limits of a party composed of 80-90 per cent German Americans, but few have investigated the ways in which ethnicity influenced their ideas and thought. This work places the American socialist movement into a transatlantic context and reconstructs how the specific features of the German diaspora in the US – phases of immigration, geographical origins and social stratification – played a role in shaping SLP members' ideas of race. As a result, this thesis uses ethnicity as a way to better understand trends which unfolded in US-based immigrant communities and shaped the radical world in America.[10]

[9] David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860-1920," *Le Mouvement Social*, no. 111 (Apr.-Jun., 1980), 201-215.

[10] For a recent critique of SLP's ethnic insularism, cf. Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 85-87; historical details on the German diaspora are based on Stan Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in New York City, 1845-1880* (Urbana:

This thesis argues that there were two main, contrasting, ways in which socialists approached racial diversity, which echoed in general terms the two opposing points of view cited at the beginning of this introduction and which are here defined as "scientific racialist" and "colour-blind internationalist". Scientific racialist socialists, like the German American correspondent of the *Volksstimme*, concluded that the modern natural and human sciences provided enough evidence to suggest that humankind was divided into different groups ("races" or "cultures") and that some groups were inferior to others. The term "science" here is not meant to imply legitimacy. Rather, "modern natural and human sciences" refers to the vast group of pseudo-sciences that developed between Europe and the US whose aim was to demonstrate authoritatively the existence of a hierarchy between different human groups.[11] By contrast, colour-blind internationalists agreed with J. P. McDonnell and fundamentally rejected the idea that racial and ethnic division had anything to do with economic relations between employers and employees, suggesting that class rather than race should be the lens through which they tackled the problems of American workers.

This thesis is a history of the clash between these two points of view in the American socialist movement during the Gilded Age, and an account of how the outcome of this clash affected the history of the American left. The early SLP was a party divided by strong political differences and characterised by a loose organisation and marked geographical dispersal. As a result, the socialist organisation rarely advanced univocal positions on the issue of racial diversity. At the foundation of the party, the two positions outlined above corresponded almost exactly to the two main factions that competed for control of the organisation. These factions were, respectively, a group of former members of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA) led by Friedrich A. Sorge, which

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University of Illinois Press, 1990); the concept of ethnicity used in this thesis is taken from the studies of whiteness and the multicultural turn (cf. infra 12-15).

[11]. Cf. George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: a Short History* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 49-96; Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution: the History of an Idea* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 2003).

supported trade unionism over political action, and a group formerly united in the Social Democratic Party of North America, which prioritised political action. Shortly after 1876, however, the colour-blind internationalist faction lost the battle and decided to abandon the SLP. As a result, the party was run for a significant period by socialists who expounded scientific racialist ideas. But the group that led the SLP between 1878 and 1890 was far from homogeneous, and its ideas were extremely varied. The debate on racial matters was broken up into a myriad of different opinions all of which were expressed in the official party press and local dailies and weeklies. No key individual or socialist publication took a clear lead in defining the party's position on race.

Colour-blind internationalism did not return to pre-eminence within the SLP until the early 1890s, when the new leader of the party Daniel De Leon made it the main – and virtually the only – approach supported in the socialist organisation. The ascendency of De Leon and his successful attempt to turn the SLP on every question into a monolithically organised Marxist phalanx significantly reduced the range of positions on race. As a result, the complications of the 1870s and 1880s turned into a single position, which can be analysed by looking at the writings of De Leon in this period. The adoption of De Leon's colour-blind socialism was the final outcome of a debate amongst SLP members that lasted over three decades and was, in effect, the position many socialists adhered to when they abandoned the SLP and joined Eugene Debs to found the Socialist Party of America in 1901. The SLP's engagement with issues of race will thus be recovered as both complex and significant for the larger history of the American left; this contrasts with the traditional dismissal by historians of the SLP's position on race as simply inadequate or non-existent – a larger historiographical trend that will now be addressed.

**I.**

Given the recent explosion of interest in "whiteness" in American labour history, the origins of Jim Crow segregation, and African American history, and the vigour with which the history of radicalism is currently studied in all of its diverse twentieth-century manifestations, it is surprising how little current scholarship has investigated the relationship between socialism and race in the late nineteenth-century.[12] Part of this absence is due to the general paucity of historical accounts on the SLP. In many books where one would expect the history of the first US-founded socialist organisation with a national outreach to be covered, the SLP is only mentioned in passing, usually to explain that it was one of the forerunners of Debs's Socialist Party of America and to stress the limits of De Leon's doctrinarism. In the vast majority of cases, the years before De Leon's leadership are covered in less than a paragraph.[13]

But the problem is exacerbated by further reasons. One of the most resourceful accounts on the history of the SLP is Selig Perlman's volume on the history of American labour during the Gilded Age, included in the *History of Labour in the United States* edited by John Commons.[14] Despite accurately reconstructing the history of the party, Perlman shows scarce interest in its policies toward racial minorities. Arguably this disinterest stems

[12] As detailed shortly below, the most important (and virtually unique) treatment of race and socialism at the end of the nineteenth century is Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans*. For the early twentieth-century, cf. the pivotal: Sally M. Miller, *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century Socialism* (London; New York: Garland, 1996).

[13] Cf., for example, Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2000), 138-140; Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: a Complete History* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 3-30. Curiously, Kazin does the opposite of what is described above: he dedicates a couple of pages to describe the early SLP, but does not even mention Daniel De Leon once (cf. Kazin, *American Dreamers*, 85-90). Aside from scholarly literature, there are many publications produced by the SLP itself. While offering partisan historiographical interpretations, they are often a source of reliable historical information. Cf. especially *Daniel De Leon, The Man and His Work: A Symposium*, ed. National Executive Committee, Socialist Labor Party (New York: National Executive Committee, Socialist Labor Party, 1920); Olive Johnson, *Daniel De Leon, American Socialist Pathfinder* (New York: New York Labor News Company, 1923); Frank Girard and Ben Perry, *The Socialist Labor Party, 1876-1991: a Short History* (Philadelphia: Livra Books, 1991).

[14] John R. Commons [et al.], *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935-1936).

from his imbibing of racial bias, which is well attested in the sections dealing with Chinese immigration in the 1870s and 1880s.[15]

The situation changed radically with Marxist-oriented labour historian Philip S. Foner. As a result of his close ties to the ideals of the Communist Party of the United States, Foner instilled his scholarly work with a special sensitivity towards the role of the organised left in the US and its relations with racial minorities, especially African Americans. His *American Socialism and Black Americans* (1977), a political history of socialist parties and black movements, was, and still is, one of the most accurate treatments of socialism and race in late nineteenth-century America. Foner describes the SLP as "oblivious" to the problem of race discrimination and blind to the expanding forms of exploitation connected to it.[16] However, his book carries one key weakness. In his work, the Marxist historian analyses almost exclusively English-language sources, in relation to a period in which American socialism was practised, spoken, and written about mostly in German.[17] This key limitation causes Foner to produce a partial and inaccurate image of the SLP's position on race and ethnicity. By expanding the analysis to include the local and national German-language press, this thesis aims to correct Foner's description, reconstructing a complex series of debates on these issues within the SLP and describing the policies that the party attempted to implement during this period.

But focusing exclusively on the literature on the SLP risks overlooking some of the larger themes that underpin this work. The lack of any treatment of the relationship between socialism and race in the late nineteenth-century is symptomatic of more profound issues in the historiography on socialism on the one hand and on race and ethnicity on the other. Part

[15] For example, here Perlman writes that the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was "doubtless the most important single factor in the history of American labour, for without it the entire country might have been overrun by Mongolian labour, and the labour movement might have become a conflict of races instead of one of classes." Ibid., 252-253.
[16] Foner, *American Socialism*, 60, 68-69,71-78.
[17] Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States. A History of the American Left* (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 19-57.

of the problem lies in the fact that the study of American socialism has been affected by the longstanding historiographical dilemma expressed by Werner Sombart in 1906: "Why is there no socialism in the United States?"[18] Sombart voiced the heartfelt concern of European socialists: how was it possible that a structured socialist movement, by definition the by-product of capitalist economic development, was not taking root in the country that more than any other in the Western world was subsuming a capitalist economic structure? While a full investigation into Sombart's argument is beyond the objectives of this thesis, it is pertinent to discuss the way in which his historiographical approach has shaped the literature on socialism across the twentieth century.

Since the publication of Sombart's essay in 1906, scholars have been animated by two goals: either to explain the ultimate reasons why socialism failed to thrive in the US, or to make the case that, in one form or another, socialism did actually contribute in some significant way to shape the history of the country. Works in the first group begin with Sombart's essay and include later undertakings by Selig Perlman, Seymour Lipset, Gary Marks, Mike Davis, and Robin Archer amongst others.[19] This branch of historiography has progressed by developing more and more sophisticated versions of American exceptionalism. Initially, Sombart suggested that American workers did not join socialist parties because the booming American economy made them better off than their European counterparts. Perlman then complicated the problem by suggesting that American workers were *job*-conscious rather than *class*-conscious. Later scholars including Lipset, Marks and Archer, introduced other elements to the picture, such as the exceptional narrow-mindedness and sectarianism of

[18] Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906; repr., London: Macmillan, 1976).
[19] Selig Perlman, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States* (1922; repr. New York: Augustus M. Kelley 1950); Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928; repr., New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1949); *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism*, eds. John H. M. Laslett and Seymour M. Lipsett (Berkeley: University of California, 1984); Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986); Seymour M. Lipsett and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here*; Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

American socialist movements and the impact of ethnic and racial divisions on the organisation of the American working class. However, the bottom-line argument remained the same: given the exceptional social, economic, and political features of the country, socialism simply could not develop in the US.

Scholars in the second group have followed two different paths. The first has been to loosen the definition of "socialism" and see in which ways left-minded radicals, activists, and intellectuals, often working outside socialist parties, have contributed to bringing change to the country.[20] Alternatively, scholars have made the point that, despite first impressions to the contrary, America *did* have a genuine socialist tradition of its own, whose history has been neglected by historians. This group includes scholars as diverse as the socialist leader Morris Hillquit and the American historian Timothy Messer-Kruse, whose work is nonetheless united by the reclamation of an indigenously-sourced and distinctively American socialist movement.[21]

In parallel with these tendencies in the study of American socialism, historical developments that happened over the last fifty years have radically changed the way in which the impact of race and ethnicity on American radical movements is studied. The civil rights movement, the campaigns for the rights of women and members of the LGBT community, anti-Vietnam War protests in the 1960s – all of these elements have contributed to expand and give new meanings to the notion of American culture.[22] A multicultural turn in the writing of American history has favoured two interconnected tendencies in the studies of movements on the left. The first is the spread of histories of specific ethnic groups and their

[20] The most straightforward example of this approach is M. Kazin, *American Dreamers*.
[21] Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (1903; repr., New York: Russel & Russel, 1965); Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition, 1848-1876* (Chapel Hill; London: North Carolina Press, 1998). Cf. also the study of regional socialism: James R. Green, *Grass-roots Socialism; Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).
[22] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (Mar. 2005), 20.

contribution to the social, economic and political development of the country. In *The Spirit of 1848*, a political history of the antebellum German American community, historian Bruce Levine has written that his work "rejects the 'either/or' approach to studying ethnicity and class."[23] By adopting an analytical framework that accommodates the fluid relationship between these two concepts, Levine has shed light on the ways in which German Americans contributed to building the Republican Party and shaping the abolitionist movement in the 1850s. In this way, Levine opened a path that has been followed by many scholars after him.[24] The second tendency established by the multicultural turn is characterised by histories of the American radical movement that pay specific attention to the combined effects of political developments and ethnically-based dynamics. A case in point is Paul Buhle's *History of Marxism in the United States* (1983), a history of left-wing movements strongly focused on the multi-ethnic nature of American radicalism.[25]

If the multicultural turn has re-centred the role of ethnicity in American historiography, whiteness studies have done the same with race. The pioneering works of David Roediger, Theodore Allen, and Noel Ignatiev, amongst others, have allowed scholars to recast the dynamics of power and exploitation in the country. By emphasising the social constructedness of racial categories and exploring their political and social effects, whiteness studies have encouraged the use of race and ethnicity as analytical lenses in areas previously untouched by them. An example is the idea of labour republicanism, "long an organizing principle for so much nineteenth-century labor history", in the words of James R. Barrett. Whiteness studies have favoured a new "racialised" understanding of this concept,

[23] Bruce C. Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 10.
[24] A selection of books that use an approach similar to Levine's and have influenced this thesis include: Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts. Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2005); Tom Goyens, *Beer and Revolution: the German Anarchist Movement in New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Alison Clark Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Washington DC; Cambridge: German Historical Institute; Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[25] Buhle, *Marxism in the United States.*

connecting it to the white privilege experienced by the post-Civil War white working class. Another effect produced by whiteness scholarship is the blurring of the distinction between race and ethnicity, obtained by exploring how ethnic features – like racial ones – had been used to determine dynamics of power and oppression across US history.[26]

This thesis sits at the intersection between the two areas of research described above, namely the scholarship on socialism in the US and recent studies of race and ethnicity. It leaves aside the obsession with explaining the reasons for the failure of socialism in the US and avoids the search for a "genuinely American" socialist movement which have ensnared previous generations of historians. Instead, by following the path opened by scholars such as Robin G. Kelley, Glenda Gilmore and Christopher Phelps, amongst others, it aims to explore the profound political significance of race and ethnicity in the history of American radical movements.[27] As scholars have rearticulated the conceptions of capitalism and labor republicanism in racial terms, it is now time to explain the origins of American socialism through the lens of race. This thesis achieves this not only by using the malleable concept of ethnicity defined by whiteness scholars and showing how the German origins of socialists affected their understandings of race; but also by putting debates on race centre stage and reconstructing the history of the party through that perspective. This investigation leads to two results: the first is a re-appraisal of the role of Darwinism and scientific racialism in the Gilded Age. In their attempts to balance socialism and scientific theories of inequality, SLP

[26] For whiteness studies, cf. Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (London: Verso, 1994-1997); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, Verso: 1991); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: the Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press), 1998. The quotation from James R. Barrett is in: James R. Barrett, "Anything Here for Historians of the Working Class?," *International Labor and Working Class* 60 (Fall 2001), 38.

[27] Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1869-1920* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Christopher Phelps, *Introduction*, in Max Shachtman, *Race and Revolution* (London: Verso, 2003); Howard Brick, Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: the U.S. Left since the Second World War* (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

members put forward innovative points of view that need to be rescued from historical oblivion. The second result is a re-discussion of the colour-blind approach. The description of it given by Philip Foner and subsequent scholars has obscured a full historical understanding of its intellectual origins and of the ways in which it shaped socialist anti-racism at the end of the nineteenth century and beyond.

Political scientist Michael C. Dawson has contended that in works on left-wing movements and the origins of Marxism in the US we see a "general absence of taking race seriously, as a historical phenomenon that has profoundly shaped American institutions, politics, and civil society, as well as individual preferences, norms, and ideologies."[28] By combining the focus on institutional history of existing scholarship on socialism with the innovative understandings of race and ethnicity which have developed in the last fifty years, this thesis takes up Dawson's invitation to put race at the core of histories of the left and conveys a new understanding of the role of the SLP in shaping ideas of socialism and race in the US at the turn of the nineteenth century.

## II.

While existing historical assessments and dismissals of the SLP have tended to treat it narrowly and reductively in various ways, this thesis seeks to reassert the variability and complexity of its intellectual make-up during the late nineteenth century. This is particularly significant in relation to socialist understandings of race when considering two factors in particular: first, the various forms of evolutionary and racial theory which socialists encountered and used; and second, the significance of regional differences, within the United States, in shaping socialists' perspectives on race – an element that this thesis analyses with the help of the local socialist press.

[28] Michael C. Dawson, *Blacks In and Out of the Left* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2013), ix.

According to a school of thought that grew out of Richard Hofstadter's influential *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944), the Gilded Age was the epoch in which racism, imperialism, and laissez faire economics were fused together in the all-conquering public ideology of "Social Darwinism." Hofstadter argues that Social Darwinism was the product of the work of the British philosopher Herbert Spencer and the American sociologist William Graham Sumner. They took Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and adapted it to interpret human interaction in society and the economy. Hofstadter maintained that through Spencer's and Sumner's popularised version of Darwinism, the establishment managed to further its conservative agenda, based on ruthless principles of economic and racial competition and the doctrine of the "survival of the fittest."[29]

Since the 1970s scholars have taken issue with Hofstadter's argument, suggesting that while many of the tendencies described by Hofstadter effectively started in that period, the connection between them was much more tenuous than he had argued. Specifically, with regard to ideas of race, scholars who have revised Hofstadter's orthodoxy maintain that in the Gilded Age the version of Darwinism supported by Spencer and Sumner was one of many scientific accounts put forward to interpret evolution and human differences. These theories, which included scientific racialism, Lamarckism (the most widespread scientific exposition of geographic determinism), and Lewis H. Morgan's anthropology, were often mixed up with one another, and drawn on variously, and often inconsistently, to develop political positions on racial and ethnic difference.[30]

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[29] Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (1944: repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1992)

[30] George W. Stocking, Jr., "The Persistence of Polygenist Thought in Post-Darwinian Anthropology," in George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture, and Evolution. Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1968); Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860-1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Thomas C. Leonard, "Origins of the Myth of Social Darwinism: The Ambiguous Legacy of Richard Hofstadter's Social Darwinism in American Thought," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 71, 2009, 37-51.

Scholars such as Mark Pittenger and Richard Weikart have discussed more closely the relationship between socialist theory and evolutionary thought during the nineteenth century.[31] Weikart's study of the relationship between German socialism and Darwinism usefully contextualises the intellectual challenges faced by American socialists. Similarly, Pittenger's work, which deals with the American context from 1870 to 1920, highlights the centrality of evolutionism to understanding Gilded Age and Progressive Era American socialism. While Weikart simply leaves the American case outside his investigation, Pittenger's work remains insensitive to the diversity of evolutionary thought and the full range of contemporary socialism in the US. Pittenger employs too simplistic a category of 'evolutionism', which he straightforwardly identifies with Spencerism without further investigating the many other evolutionist frameworks used by Americans in this period. At the same time, he includes academics who are hard to define as socialist, such as Richard T. Ely and John Bates Clark, while excluding key figures of the Gilded Age socialist movement such as Friedrich A. Sorge and Adolph Douai.

Building on these previous treatments, this thesis rearticulates the way in which Americans in the SLP discussed socialism and evolutionism. My analysis of socialist writings on race suggests, in the first place, that Hofstadter's critics were right to point out that Social Darwinism is far too rigid a concept to describe the racial thought of Gilded Age Americans. Crucially, SLP members regularly deployed contemporary social theories of race difference to discuss issues around the place of Chinese immigrants, African Americans and Native Americans in American society, creating a variety of positions that Hofstadter's concept of Social Darwinism cannot explain on its own. By focusing on the different phases of German immigration and using ethnicity as an analytical lens, this thesis argues that socialists' approaches to race diversity evolved across time. Early immigrants, who were born in

[31] Richard Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein* (San Francisco; London: International Scholars Publication, 1999); Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870-1920* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

Germany in the 1820s and 1830s and who arrived in the US in the 1850s, discussed racial diversity using the holistic methodologies and geographic determinism of the influential naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. They became familiar with Darwinism, but they mixed it up with pre-existing scientific racialist assumptions. By contrast, later immigrants, born in the 1830s and 1840s, and who arrived in the US in the 1870s, saw Darwinism as an inescapable law that shaped social relations. Even if they used the word Darwinism, they did not necessarily refer to Darwin's theory of evolutionary transmutation. What they had in mind was a secularised and progressive social theory, which socialists had to integrate into their materialist framework. Things changed again in the 1890s. Under De Leon's leadership, American socialists started to systematically connect Darwinism with the social theories of Herbert Spencer. For De Leon, Darwinism was no longer a progressive theory, but rather a bourgeois undertaking inextricably connected to the "survival of the fittest" model embraced by ruthless capitalists and robber barons. De Leon replaced Darwin and Spencer with Lewis H. Morgan, putting Morgan's anthropological discoveries at the heart of his Marxist model.

Alongside this constant development in the core precepts of American socialism were discussions on single issues, discussions in which theoretical points of view mixed with practical circumstances and individual attitudes. When examining the period before De Leon's leadership, ideas on race and class formulated by socialists need to be connected with some further circumstances to make them useful to expand our knowledge on Gilded Age radical thought and on the history of the SLP in general. A constant in the following analysis of socialist opinions is the importance of the larger social and geographic context, understood as the peculiar social, economic and political circumstances in which opinions of SLP members were formulated. Invariably, socialists located below the Mason-Dixon line had more sophisticated understandings of the dynamics of economic exploitation and racial discrimination suffered by African Americans in the South than their comrades in the North –

information that must be connected to the Northern SLP's limited ability to organise black workers. Similarly, socialists who spent some time in California provided more informed opinions on the issue of Chinese immigration than their counterparts who remained on the East Coast. At the same time, the local political circumstances affected the capacity of socialists to investigate and understand specific issues. It is not a coincidence that the St. Louis section, one of the strongest in the country in the 1877-1881 period, produced some of the finest analyses both on African Americans and on Native Americans.

A geographically-grounded analysis is possible thanks to the use of local socialist press as the main source of investigation. The centrality of the local press for the research conducted in this thesis can hardly be underestimated. For a party with weak organisational structures, spread over a vast territory and with great internal differences, the press was the only means available to try to coordinate its political activity. Not by chance, over its history most of the efforts of the SLP leadership were concentrated on running without deficit the official papers of the party (at least one in English and one in German), an undertaking that was rarely successful: between 1876 and 1882, for example, five different English-language weeklies were started, none of which survived its second year of existence. The situation of the local press was a sure indicator of the general "health status" of the local section, and a source of information about its ethnic composition: socialist newspapers were founded and died out with the same swiftness as the local political cradles that ran them. Tellingly, the proliferation of local newspapers in the 1876-1890 period – as opposed to the consolidation of a few national socialist papers after 1890 – reflected the different phases of the history of the SLP and had significant effects upon the ways in which the internal debate on race and ethnicity developed.[32]

[32] On the importance of the press for the German American community, cf. *German Workers' Culture*, ed. Keil; Elliot Shore, Ken Fones-Wolf, James P. Danky, *The German-American Radical Press: the Shaping of a Left Political Culture, 1850-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

Ultimately, a geographically-based investigation of the SLP shows a party solidly rooted in the North-eastern and Mid-western industrial areas of the country, with isolated outposts in the South and in the West – a geographical spread that, not coincidentally, overlapped precisely with that of German immigrants in the country.[33] Crucially, socialist location shaped significantly the ways in which SLP members reacted to the issues connected to race and ethnicity. This element and the ways in which socialists understood and used scientific theories of race are two central aspects of the analysis presented in this thesis.

**III.**

This work is an intellectual history of the ideas of race and ethnicity in the SLP. However, given that the history of the SLP has never been reconstructed in detail, it adopts an approach that falls somewhere between intellectual and institutional history. This work is based on three different types of primary sources: the first and most widely used is official and local party press (both in English and in German); the second is official party documentation, such as platforms, convention proceedings, letters, and all the material that is included in the official party archive now stored at the Wisconsin Historical Society; third, where available, personal documentation of the key figures of the party, in the form of diaries, letters and so on.

The structure of this thesis reflects the mutually reinforcing imperatives of institutional and intellectual history. While the events described here go from the early 1850s to the end of the nineteenth century, the political trajectory of the SLP in its first twenty-six years of existence is given particular attention. Two key chronological landmarks need to be mentioned: the first is the foundation of the party in 1876 and the second is the 1899 split between De Leon's supporters and his political adversaries. In the interpretation presented in

[33] "1890 Population Distribution," *census.gov.* Accessed July 1, 2016, https://www.census.gov/history/www/reference/maps/1890_population_distribution.html

this thesis, the 1899 split was the moment the SLP became a tiny sect bound to an unchanging outlook and ceased to have any influence whatsoever on the history of the American socialist movement. Given these chronological limits, the first chapter reconstructs socialist ideas of race and ethnicity before and after the Civil War, providing the crucial intellectual background which informed later discussions of socialism and race, as will be traced through the rest of the thesis. The chapter takes the Civil War as a dividing line, and argues that, whereas in the antebellum period socialists were part of the most radical wing of the abolitionist movement, after 1865 these same socialists came out of the era of Reconstruction sharing with the majority of American workers the idea that, once chattel slavery was abolished, it was time to adopt a universalist approach and solve the problem of wage slavery. The second chapter starts with the foundation of the SLP in 1876 and introduces the dichotomy between race-blind internationalists and scientific racialists within its membership. Most of the chapter is dedicated to demonstrating how different waves of German immigration brought with them different approaches to the problem of racial diversity, and how this diversity impacted on the history of the party.

Chapters three, four and five follow both a chronological and a thematic structure. All of them cover the period between 1876 and 1890, but they are dedicated to discussions within the SLP of the "Chinese question," the "Negro question" and the "Indian question" respectively. Continuously moving the focus from single leaders of the party (such as Adolph Douai, Peter H. Clark, and Albert R. Parsons), to specific sections, to events that characterised the history of the party in this period, these chapters reconstruct the multiplicity of voices that characterised the SLP in its early history. Finally, chapter six documents the shift the socialist party went through under the leadership of Daniel De Leon. The socialist leader took the movement from its small German American cradle to maturity as a nationally organised English-speaking political party. De Leon gave the SLP a clear political line, based

on his original interpretation of Marxism. He forced the party to abandon its scientific racialist opinions and to embrace a rigidly colour-blind stance, based on racial equality and the prioritisation of class lines over racial and national divisions.

**IV.**

Ultimately, then, this thesis locates the birth of colour-blind socialism (and, in a sense, colour-blind progressivism) in the United States at the intersection of a debate between scientific evolutionary racialism and labour internationalism which was conducted within the Socialist Labor Party in the post-Reconstruction period. If seen in this context, the adoption of a strict colour-blind position looked like a step forward for a socialist movement that often lingered in positions that justified the inferiority of certain racial groups and postponed any discussion on racial equality to the moment in which "backward races" would have achieved the level of development of the allegedly superior white culture. However, while dislocating socialist thought from scientific Darwinism, the adoption of colour-blind socialism was detrimental to the development of more sophisticated politics of anti-racism. By denying the importance of race as an element structurally embedded in the social fabric of the United States, socialists put themselves in a position from which it was impossible to adequately counter racial prejudice and racial discrimination, and ultimately intensified their disengagement with non-white workers in the US. The outcome of this debate within the SLP would affect the history of the American left for decades to come.

# FREEDOM FOR BLACKS AND WHITES: GERMAN AMERICAN SOCIALISTS, THE CIVIL WAR AND THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL AND ECONOMIC EMANCIPATION (1845-1876)

In 1871, Friedrich A. Sorge, the Secretary of the North American Federation of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA), sat down to write a heated response to a communication he had received from the General Committee of the London-based organisation. In this communication, the leading organ of the IWMA had pointed to the fact that "no branches of U.S. workmen do yet at all exist, but only branches formed by Foreigners residing in the U.S." With the aim of "dispersing some erroneous views about our American organization," Sorge wrote back that "the term 'foreign' is here undoubtedly misplaced and adopted simply by judging our situation in America (i.e. U.S.) to be similar to the situation of foreign workingmen in European countries." Sorge listed several reasons why the European and the American situations were completely different: "(a) Workingmen from other countries arriving here do not come with the intention of residing but temporarily here; (b) they are in nowise regarded as foreigners or simple residents, but as citizens, the only distinction being made by calling them sometimes adopted citizens; (c) they not only claim to be, but are de facto et de jure citizens of this country in full and unabridged political right; (d) They form an important and considerable part of this country's Trade Unions & Labor

Societies." In conclusion, maintained Sorge, "the term 'foreigner' … does not apply to us at all."[1]

Sorge's message sheds light on a key problem that was complicating the organisation of American workers in the middle decades of the nineteenth century: the multi-ethnic and multiracial composition of the American labour force. The IWMA, by definition, was born to unite workers across national boundaries. Yet, in the case of the US, the divisions were not across different countries, but *within* the same country. In his message, Sorge proudly rejected the idea that German and French members of the International were not American workers. He accused the European leaders of the General Committee of not understanding the dynamics of integration operating in the country, and not recognising that the American working class was constitutively multi-ethnic and multiracial.

The challenges posed by the diversity of the American working class, and the multiple ways in which socialists arriving in the US from pre-unified Germany faced them, are the subject of this chapter. German immigrants to the US came from societies in which contrasts between different racial and ethnic groups were difficult to discern. However, once they arrived in America, they rapidly had to come to terms with a society torn apart by debates over slavery in the South and additionally impacted by repeated acts of violence against immigrants committed by Nativist movements such as the Know-Nothing Party. The investigation of socialists' ideas on racial and ethnic diversity presented here necessarily intersects with discussions on slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction. Early socialists landed in the US in the 1850s, a moment when the country was going through profound economic, social and political changes. The tensions generated by the Civil War radically shaped socialist opinions on race during this period.

[1] Friedrich A. Sorge, "To the General Council of the I.W.A.," May 21, 1871. Miscellaneous typescript documents. Reel 3, International Workingmen's Association Papers, Microfilmed edition, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

By focusing on some key German American leaders, the first part of this chapter explores socialist ideas about slavery, race and the Civil War. Antebellum socialist leaders such as August Willich and Joseph Weydemeyer did not belong to a coordinated and organised movement inspired by socialist principles. They acted as individuals within their local communities, voicing their opinions in local German American newspapers. Before 1861, socialists strongly opposed slavery on economic and moral grounds. They considered slavery an out-dated and inhuman system of economic production, and they contended that the country could progress only insofar as it could rid itself of the dualism between the North and the South and embrace a modern system of industrial production. Early twentieth-century Marxists would read the Civil War as a bourgeois strategy of Northern employers to expand capitalism to the entirety of the US.[2] Socialists in the 1850s would have vigorously dissented with this interpretation. For them, the Civil War was an overdue process of modernising the country, and one that required active participation – as the decision of Weydemeyer and Willich to fight in the Union Army attests. Moral considerations were amongst the arguments presented by socialists for the abolition of slavery, but they were generally subordinated to reflections about the economic structure of the country. In other words, socialists expressed a condemnation of slavery that was solidly based on a consideration of political economy and was far from the moralist approach of abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison.[3]

The German American socialist movement consolidated itself after the end of the Civil War: in 1867, Sorge opened the first North American section of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA) in New York, an institution which rapidly became a

[2] A case in point is Herman Schlüter, *Lincoln, Labor, and Slavery: a Chapter From the Socialist History of America* (New York: Socialist Literature Co., 1913); for an analysis of the socialists' interpretations of the Civil War, cf. Brian Kelly, "W.E.B. Du Bois, Black Agency and the Slaves' Civil War," *International Socialist Review* (2016). Accessed May 2, 2016, http://isreview.org/issue/100/w-e-b-du-bois-black-agency-and-slaves-civil-war.

[3] On William Lloyd Garrison, cf. Enrico Dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini: Abolition, Democracy, and Radical Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Denis Brennan, *The Making of an Abolitionist: William Lloyd Garrison's Path to Publishing the Liberator* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014);

beacon for socialists of German origin scattered around the country. This group experienced many problems caused by the strong ethnic diversity of its membership (which was divided between American, French and German components) and by the poor organisation of the American labour movement during this period. It attempted to federate with the National Labor Union (NLU), but the partnership did not become a reality before the collapse of the trade unions' federation in the early 1870s. By analysing Sorge's private notes and descriptions of the situation of African Americans in the South published in the German American socialist press of the time, the second part of this chapter argues that German American socialists realised that a strong racial prejudice still prevented African Americans in the South from enjoying their recently achieved status of freedom. However, they mostly expressed the hope that black workers, in the near future, would join the fight of Northern workers against capitalism without further investigating the conditions of African Americans in the Reconstruction South. In this period, the colour-blind internationalism of the IWMA was surprisingly in line with the universalist fight against wage slavery promoted by Northern American workers. German American socialists attempted to use this communality of interests to bridge the ethnic rivalries that still separated them from their American colleagues. In practical terms, Sorge did all in his power to merge the IWMA with the NLU. In this process, the cause of African American equality stopped being a priority of socialists. Even though socialists saw the shortcomings of Reconstruction, they did not work to fix them.

## "Only in this way we will be Germans": antebellum socialists' struggle for abolitionism and ethnic integration

In 1859 the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass emphatically declared that "a German has only to be German in order to be utterly opposed to slavery. In feeling, as well as in

conviction and principle, they are antislavery."[4] Despite the optimism of the great abolitionist leader, expressed when the anti-slavery movement was at its height, the situation in the antebellum German American community was not so uniform. Responses to the problem of slavery evolved over time. For the first generation of immigrants, who arrived in the US in the 1830s and 1840s, the issue of slavery was not a matter of primary importance. For the most part, these German Americans could live and settle in states where slavery was already abolished, and their political priorities mostly related to land redistribution. Moreover, the anti-abolitionist Democratic Party had traditionally represented the interests of German Americans. The party of the people, in a Jacksonian sense, was also the party of the immigrant crowds.[5]

The situation in the German community changed significantly in the 1850s. In some ways, as has been suggested by historian Bruce Levine, the debate on the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 made it impossible to remain neutral on the issue of slavery.[6] Furthermore, the arrival of a generation of liberal and politically pro-active immigrants, forced out of Europe after the failure of the 1848 revolts, led the German American community to take a more clearly defined abolitionist stance. Many historians have convincingly shown how recently arrived German Americans made a key contribution to the success of the newly founded Republican Party.[7] In the recently populated areas of the industrial Mid-West (such as Illinois, Missouri and Wisconsin) in particular, "freedom-loving" German Americans represented a key group of swing voters, who became decisive in pushing the Republican Party on anti-slavery positions. As Allison Clark Efford has stressed, the success of abolitionism amongst

[4] Frederick Douglass, "Adopted Citizens and Slavery," *Douglass's Monthly* (August 1859), quoted in Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,1992), 150.
[5] Levine, *The Spirit of 1848*, 150-151.
[6] Ibid., 148-158.
[7] August H. Nimtz Jr., *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America: the 'Absolute Democracy' or 'Defiled Republic'* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 41-86; Mischa Honeck, *We are Revolutionists: German-speaking Immigrants and American Abolitionists after 1848* (Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 2011); Alison Clark Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Washington DC; Cambridge: German Historical Institute; Cambridge University Press, 2013).

German Americans was the result of a temporary coalition between liberal and socialist forces. Even if they disagreed on fundamental tenets of their political strategies, they stood shoulder to shoulder fighting for the same cause.[8]

An evolution towards anti-slavery stances can be observed in the ideas of the German American socialists who landed in the US between the 1840s and 1850s. The first two German American labour leaders who attempted to organise the American labour force according to socialist principles, Hermann Kriege and Wilhelm Weitling, both had an ambiguous approach towards slavery. Kriege straightforwardly argued in 1846 that "we would support the Abolitionist movement if our scope was to throw our republic in anarchy … according to us, slaves' release would not bring any improvement in the conditions of our 'black brothers', but it would only worsen the conditions of our 'white brothers'."[9] Weitling, according to socialist historian Hermann Schlüter, did not "push himself so far in a silly and provocative way as Kriege to show his antipathy towards the Abolitionist movement and his support for the slaves' owners"; however, throughout his entire political activities he treated slavery "in a completely superficial way … Nowhere in the *Republik des Arbeiter* or in his public interventions is it possible to find a clear anti-slavery stance, nor is there mention of the fact that the northern working class should turn its backs with all its strength on the residual demonstration of slave production in the South."[10]

German American socialists in the 1850s rejected this early support for slavery. In this decade, the arrival of many "Forty-Eighters" expanded the size of the German American immigrant, and by extension the socialist, community in the US. Across the country, socialists campaigned to organise German immigrant workers and, when possible, cooperated with their American counterparts. Levine and Efford stress the centrality of the *Sozialistische*

[8] Efford, *German Immigrants, Race and Citizenship*, 53-66.
[9] Quoted in: Hermann Schlüter, *Die Anfänge der deutsche Arbeiterbewegung in Amerika* (Verlag von J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger: Stuttgart, 1907) 189; cf. also Levine, *The Spirit of 1848*, 151-152.
[10] Schlüter, *Die Anfänge*, 190.

*Turner Bünde* (Socialist Gymnastic Associations) in spreading socialist ideas and anti-slavery sentiments. These associations were modelled after German gymnastic societies, where people met to discuss, read and exercise. They rapidly spread across the country in the early 1850s. By 1855 the national federation of the American *Bünde* boasted 74 clubs with 4,500 members.[11] In the early 1850s, the Marxist leader Joseph Weydemeyer replaced Kriege and Weitling as the protagonist of the attempts to coordinate German and American workers. Weydemeyer was a close ally of Karl Marx. The two agreed completely on the methods and strategies needed to organise the international working class against capitalism. In 1852, Marx contributed to Weydemeyer's attempts to publish a labour paper in the US by sending a piece of writing he had written on Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's 1851 coup. The essay, serialised in Weydemeyer's monthly *Die Revolution*, would later become Marx's pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In 1853 Weydemeyer founded the *Amerikanischer Arbeiterbund* in New York, and in the following years he continued his organisational efforts in Milwaukee and Chicago.[12] Finally, in 1857 a *Kommunistische Bund* (a Communist club) was founded in New York, emphatically defined by historian August H. Nimtz as "arguably the first Marxist organization in the Western hemisphere".[13] All these organisations were fiercely anti-slavery and prided themselves on guaranteeing access to membership regardless of gender and race. However, none of them succeeded in gaining lasting support from the German American workers.[14]

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[11] Levine, *The Spirit of 1848*, 92. Cf. also: Richard T. Ely, *The Labor Movement in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1886), 221-223.
[12] Karl Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer: Pioneer of American Socialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1947); David Herreshoff, *American Disciples of Marx: The Origins of American Marxism, from the Transcendentalists to De Leon* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 62-64; cf. also Justine Davis Randers-Pehrson, *Adolf Douai, 1819-1888: the Turbulent Life of a German Forty-Eighter in the Homeland and in the United States* (New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000), 285.
[13] Nimtz, *Marx, Tocqueville and Race*, 67.
[14] *Statuten des Kommunisten Klubs in New York*, Reel 2, International Workingmen's Association Papers, Microfilmed edition, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer. Pioniere del Socialismo in America* (Milano: Pantarei, 2002) 171-181; Friedrich A. Sorge, *Friedrich A. Sorge's Labor Movement in the United States. A History of the American Working Class from Colonial Times to 1890*

Which arguments did antebellum German American socialists use to oppose slavery? In what way did they connect socialism and abolitionism? Furthermore, did abolitionism go together with the condemnation of discrimination based on race or was it exclusively grounded on economic analyses? By closely examining the ideas of socialist leaders at the time, it is possible to answer these questions and shed light on the progressive radicalisation of German American socialism. Active participation in the abolitionist movement led socialist leaders to believe in the possibility of a radical economic reorganisation of the country, one that would bring the US closer to socialism. In the ideas of socialists, racial equality featured as a significant element of this social and economic reorganisation. The following pages will focus on two protagonists of the antebellum scenario. The first is Adolph Douai, a Forty-Eighter from Thuringia who settled in Texas in 1854 and later became one of the most important leaders of the Socialist Labor Party. The second is the above-mentioned August Willich, editor of the important Republican paper *Cincinnati Republikaner* in the border city of Cincinnati, Ohio.

### *Adolph Douai: the impossible struggle of an abolitionist and free thinker in antebellum West Texas*

"Why did I want to go to Texas? The principal reason was that I was tired of civilization, that I wanted to become a farmer and that I wanted to bring up my children as wholly free as individuals".[15] Adolph Douai, a native of Altenburg (Thuringia), Ph.D. in Philosophy, teacher and journalist, social-democrat and free-thinker, could not have picked a worse location to try a new life as a farmer in the United States. When he landed in Indianola in 1853, Texas was a wild region fraught with profound political, social and economic tensions. Admitted to the

eds. Philip S. Foner and Brewster Chamberlin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 95-97; Schlüter, *Die Anfänge*, 194.

[15] Adolph Douai, *Autobiography of Dr. Adolf Douai, Revolutionist of 1848, Texas Pioneer, Introducer of the Kindergarten, Educator, Author, Editor, 1819-1888*, trans. and ed. Richard H. Douai Böker, 1959, Folder 2, Adolph Douai Papers, Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas, Austin, 65.

United States less than ten years earlier, the state was largely depopulated. Douai drove the group of German people who migrated with him to West Texas, to the newly founded German colony of Neu Braunfels, thirty miles from San Antonio. His mistake was to think that Texas would be a place in which a free thinker and radical like himself could live in "whole freedom" with his children and family. Rather, the state was characterised by intolerance and oppression, especially for African Americans and immigrants.[16]

Even before joining the United States in 1845, the population of Texas included around 13,000 enslaved African Americans. This number quadrupled by 1850 and boomed to 182,000 in 1860, when slaves represented more than 30 percent of the state population.[17] Although the number of German immigrants did not follow the same trajectory, by 1850 around five per cent of the population was of German origin, forming a dense enclave that was mostly concentrated in the Western area where Douai settled with his community. Threats to African Americans and immigrants came largely from Anglo-American white Southerners, who still represented the largest group in Texas. The Lone Star state had won its independence after a long series of engagements with the Mexican army. Its foundational myths were rooted in a strongly racist anti-Mexican sentiment, sentiments that in the decades following independence and eventual admission to the Union were rapidly redirected against Germans and African Americans. The Know-Nothing Party expanded significantly in the state, because its nativist platform built on ideas already widespread among white Texans.[18]

Considering these circumstances, the appointment of Adolph Douai as editor of the first German language newspaper in San Antonio in 1853 had the same effect as a bull in a china shop. In his autobiography, Douai wrote that in 1840 he was "irreligious and a democrat."[19] Later, he declared that in 1848 he was "still a pantheist, but already a social-democrat." By

[16] Robert A. Calvert, Arnoldo De Leon and Gregg Cantrell, *The History of Texas* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 85-95, 127-130.
[17] Ibid., 112, 118.
[18] W. Darrell Overdyke, *The Know-Nothing Party in the South* (Gloucester, MA: Pater Smith, 1968).
[19] Douai, *Autobiography of Dr. Adolf Douai*, 26.

the time he arrived in the US, he had developed a more coherent radical and non-religious point of view. Douai was a free thinker and a republican, who believed in political and social equality and held his home country in high esteem. Under his editorship, not only did the *San Antonio Zeitung* immediately start to attack the nativist activists of the Know-Nothing Party, but it also published articles aimed at countering the spread of slavery in West Texas. According to Douai, aversion to slavery went hand in hand with defending the honour and respectability of German immigrants. Slavery was not only a moral wrong, but also constituted a weak economic system. Additionally, continued immigration into the area was fundamental, because it could provide Texas with the free workforce to colonise the South and make it prosperous.

In the *San Antonio Zeitung* Douai used moral and economic arguments to condemn slavery. An article published in 1853 clearly argued that slavery caused the moral degradation of human beings. Commenting on the lynching of a black slave accused of homicide in Missouri, Douai wrote that "this is again an example of the desolate depravation in which the white race is overthrown by negro slavery."[20] Under slavery, contended Douai, both slaveholders and slaves lost their capacity to distinguish between moral and immoral behaviour, and violence inevitably proliferated. Douai recognised that African Americans had problems in the North too. In 1854 the *San Antonio Zeitung* published an article about the condition of blacks in "non-slavery states," which was defined as a "purgatory," a half-way house between slavery and freedom, where African Americans experienced the fruition of some rights but also the persistence of racism.[21] Yet Douai believed that the North was in a much better condition than the South. Several articles in the *San Antonio Zeitung* made this point through economic arguments. A piece on "free labor and slave labor," reprinted from Elihu Burritt's paper *Citizen of the World*, set moral against economic arguments. The article

[20] Adolph Douai, "Ein Labensbild. Sclavenhälter und Sclaven," *San Antonio Zeitung,* August 27, 1853.
[21] Adolph Douai, "Die freiein Farbigen in den Nicht-Sclaven Staaten," *San Antonio Zeitung*, August 12, 1854.

started by declaring that, from a moral point of view, there were no consistent ways to defend slavery. But even if Southern slaveholders did not want to consider this side of the problem, they must recognise that slavery was not profitable from a mere economic point of view either: "Throwing aside every reference to the moral aspects of such a question, we doubt whether any intelligent southern planter can convince himself, on strictly commercial principles, that a property which must be inevitably valueless in 35 years, and may perish or disappear any day, can be legitimately estimated as so low a rate of 10 per cent for annual rent."[22] Slavery, concluded the article, could not compete with the quality of the work guaranteed by German and Irish farmers. Therefore, a mass immigration of white farmers into the South would have stopped the moral shame of slavery and reversed its economic decline.

Another element that showed the problems created by slavery, according to Douai, was the lack of a strong middle class in the South. The German radical mentioned the theories of Edward Gibbon's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* to make the point that the South was on the verge of an economic collapse: "Men cannot be happy but by laboring and enjoying the fruit of their toil. No man can be happy who does not labor, neither can anyone be happy who is deprived of a part or the whole of the fruits of his labor."[23] He referred to republican values and made the argument that a sizable number of people who enjoyed the fruit of their labour made the state stronger and richer. This article, like the piece from the *Citizen of the World*, concluded that German immigrants could represent the ideal social group to build a new middle class in the South.

In Douai's rhetoric the defences of immigration and abolitionism reinforced each other: the more immigrants arrived in the US, the more the cause of abolitionism would strengthen, because Europeans, in Douai's mind, were by definition against slavery. The German

[22] "Free Labor and Slave Labor," *San Antonio Zeitung*, May 5, 1855.
[23] Adolph Douai, "The South and the middle-class," *San Antonio Zeitung*, January 6, 1855.

American editor made this point clear in an article published at the peak of the *San Antonio Zeitung*'s popularity in 1854. First, Douai reprinted a long letter from the "true Republican" Thomas Jefferson, in which the Founding Father had argued that "the hour of emancipation is advancing in the march of time." Secondly, he referred to German history to prove the point that his fellow countrymen were abolitionist in principle: "Scarcely any German can be so stupid as not to understand the question of slave emancipation: they know it from their own or their fathers' experiences."[24] Finally, he targeted the Know-Nothing by asking: "why censure Germans, if they in common with Jefferson and so many great and immortal Americans call slavery an evil, and honest in their convictions, merely differ with you in opinion … ?"[25] The German American editor was replying to the accusations of nativists who labelled as "un-American" the defence of slavery: being abolitionist, as Germans were, was being presented as a genuinely American commitment.

The calm in the *San Antonio Zeitung* offices did not last long. Within a year of founding of the paper, Douai had already received lynching threats, his partner had left, and many advertisers were withdrawing their offers for fear of being associated with the "abolitionist paper." Eventually, by the summer of 1854 the pressure on the *Zeitung* was so high that the stockholders who supported the paper decided to sell it. Douai, with no intention of abandoning his fight, raised among his friends the money necessary to buy the newspaper and continue publication. One of the donors was Fredrick Law Olmsted, the New England architect, whom Douai had met in Texas during Olmsted's trip to the South in 1853.[26] Contact with him turned into active help in 1854 and Olmsted supported Douai's project of publishing some articles in English to reach a wider audience.

But after a couple of years of resistance Douai caved in against the anti-immigrant and racist sentiments of the Texan public opinion. In 1856 he was forced to sell the *San Antonio*

[24] Adolph Douai, "A Letter of Thomas Jefferson," *San Antonio Zeitung*, December 2, 1854.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Honeck, *We Are Revolutionists*, 43-46.

*Zeitung* and leave the state. Having seen with his own eyes the effects of slavery, he continued to fight it with reinvigorated energy from Boston, where he moved with his family. Albeit unsuccessful, his struggle for a free Texas left traces that were not forgotten. In 1867 the socialist received a copy of a newspaper, whose first article read as follows:

> This newspaper, the first to be founded in Texas by negroes, was printed on the same press which Dr. Adolf Douai founded in San Antonio in 1853 in order to combat slavery. It will be a great satisfaction to him that the freed slaves of Texas gratefully remember his dangerous and courageous agitation in their behalf.[27]

### *"Are the Coloured human beings or Not?" August Willich and the fight for racial equality in antebellum Cincinnati*

*Enteweder-oder*. Either-or. This was the formula, a sort of minimalist slogan, invented by the editor of the *Cincinnati Republikaner* August Willich to define the fight to the death against slavery inaugurated by John Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry in October 1859. Either with John Brown or against him. Either with civilisation or against it. Either for freedom or for slavery. There was no in-between choice for Willich. After Brown's arrest, the United States had to decide which road it wanted to take.

August Willich became the editor of the *Cincinnati Republikaner* on the sixth of December 1858. Forgetting his past as an army officer and cartographer for the American government, Willich accepted John B. Stallo's offer to become a journalist in order to start his life as a political activist. By adding the subheading *Organ der Arbeiter* ("Organ of the workers") to the front page of the newspaper, Willich immediately made his policy clear. Using the platform of the newspaper, he declared that the support of the Republican Party

[27] Douai, *Autobiography of Dr. Adolf Douai*, 130.

would continue as long as workers had the strength to create their own party.[28] Willich had a steadfast faith in the virtues of republican and democratic governments. In the opening platform of the paper he explained that the "will of the majority" was the criterion that should determine the government of the state.

Willich's firm commitment to the virtues of popular government was consistent with the vigorously anti-authoritarian sentiments he had showed in the 1848-49 revolts against the Prussian state in the Rhineland.[29] He was born in 1810 in Brauensberg, East Prussia, and received a military education. He remained in the Prussian army until 1846, when he resigned due to his adhesion to republican values. Willich repeatedly attempted to organise revolts against the Prussian government, even after 1849, and for this he was harshly criticised by Karl Marx, who disagreed with his pro-active attitude and lack of political strategy. Even when he arrived in the US in 1853 his first plan was to organise a company of Germans to sail from New York and provoke a revolution in the German lands.[30]

In Cincinnati, Willich found a large community of German émigrés. Willich's *Cincinnati Republikaner* was a small but skilfully produced newspaper. A daily publication of four pages, it included a vast array of information and debates on all the topics of interest for German immigrants. But the variety of material was reduced from October 1859 onwards. John Brown's exploit captured Willich's attention and urged him to start a huge campaign against slavery. The slogan "entweder-oder", reproduced at the end of all the articles that dealt with the topic of slavery or race discrimination, was representative of the way the German socialist framed the problem: the situation was so urgent that no one could turn their

[28] *Cincinnati Republikaner*, December 6, 1858.
[29] Loyd David Easton, *Hegel's First American Followers: the Ohio Hegelians: John B. Stallo, Peter Kaufmann, Moncure Conway and August Willich, with key Writings* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1966), 159-170.
[30] Ibid.

back on it. Further silence was connivance and complicity. In this situation, stopping slavery was an absolute priority.[31]

But Willich had not always held this position. Just two weeks before starting to follow Brown's story, the *Republikaner* published an article where Willich's position was expressed in more moderate terms. The racist phrasing of the article's title, "Why should we care about the nigger? We want to start with ourselves!," was openly provocative. Willich wanted to accuse those white workers in the North who thought that they could improve their own conditions without campaigning for the rights of African Americans.

> The slaveholders' party knows very well that slavery means not only the slavery of black workers but also of forced labour in general. It works purposely towards the formation of a two-class society as existed in the Greek republics: on the one hand, the class of the free, those engaged in science, art, and politics, on the other, the class of forced labour, irrespective of whether the worker be a coloured or a white man.[32]

Willich argued that chattel slavery and wage slavery were but two aspects of the same form of exploitation, and they should, therefore, be addressed together. However, Willich further contended that wage workers had the opportunity to change the situation using the republican institutions of the nation, a possibility that was denied to black workers. "The white [worker] is formally free and has some chance to subvert his condition, i.e. to become the owner or co-owner of the shop where he works, whereas the black [worker] is quite involuntarily property

[31] For information on Cincinnati in the 1850s, see the accurate description in Mischa Honeck, "An Unexpected Alliance. August Willich, Peter H. Clark, and the Abolitionist Movement in Cincinnati," in *Germans and African Americans. Two Centuries of Exchanges*, eds. Larry A. Greene and Anke Ortlepp, (Oxford, MI: University of Mississippi, 2010), 17-36.
[32] August Willich, "Was geht uns der Nigger an? Wir wollen mit uns selbst anfangen!" *Cincinnati Republikaner*, October 3, 1859.

of the capitalist." The "formal liberty" of the white worker was the key to subverting the system. Willich, faithful to his republican values, believed that workers would achieve political power and change the economic laws that structured these circumstances. Striking a more moderate note than he would in later writings, Willich's plan implied quite clearly that black rights, while desirable, were subordinate to the achievement of white rights. Eventually, only once the "external political domination" was finished, would it be possible to enter "the real battleground of human rights" and fight for racial equality. In the present condition, black workers did not have the possibility to change their situation but were involuntarily connected to the future of their white colleagues.[33]

As the sectional crisis over slavery intensified, John Brown's raid and execution undermined Willich's faith in republican institutions. "The Rubicon has been crossed," wrote Willich the day after the hanging of John Brown. The death of Brown was a shock for him. But what upset this republican socialist beyond reason was that a court in the State of Virginia, in the full capabilities of its powers, could rule on the hanging of an activist for the human rights of African Americans. "If the wrong and the crime become legal, if the wrong and the crime create their own courts, if these courts rule on humanity and human rights, if these courts pronounce their judgments in the name of the Law, then the life of the community and of the state are in danger." At this point the fight against "legal crime" became a fight of "civilisation against barbarism."[34]

Willich decided to organise a celebration in Brown's honour with the support of the Over-the-Rhine Social Workingmen's Club. The event took place on the fourth of December 1859 at the German Institute and was followed by torch-lit march in downtown Cincinnati. Moncure Conway, an abolitionist Unitarian clergyman, and Peter H. Clark, a black teacher and activist (and later a member of the SLP) joined Willich on the stage. An interracial crowd

[33] Ibid.
[34] August Willich, "Die Rubicon ist vollbracht! Die Racherhat vollbracht! +John Brown+", *Cincinnati Republikaner*, December 3, 1859.

attended the meeting. The speakers were cheered by unanimous applause which, Willich recalled later, described the "inner bond of humanity, [which] brought forth a harmonious melody sung by races and nationalities separated by nothing but outward appearance."[35] In the chronicle of the events published on December 5 in the *Republikaner*, Willich refined his anti-slavery position with republican arguments: in Europe a crime like John Brown's hanging would be comprehensible and explicable, because authoritarian powers run the state. "But here in the Republic we make the law itself, there is no external despotic power here. We govern ourselves, and this self-government is written in the Constitution." The Constitution was based on the respect of "human rights," and slavery was incompatible with the words written by the Founding Fathers.[36]

Willich could not have expected that his fellow German countrymen would be guilty of a serious case of racial discrimination just twenty days after the demonstration in favour of John Brown. For Willich, anti-slavery politics and inter-racial equality went hand in hand; but such a duality of purpose was not necessarily obvious or desirable for other German Americans. On December 18, 1859 three black people were refused access to the German Institute to attend a meeting. This fact was immediately denounced by the German editor, who initially thought that the teacher Peter Clark, who had given a much appreciated speech during the John Brown demonstration, was among them. As noted by historian Mischa Honeck, Willich was particularly upset by the fact that German immigrants committed this act of racism.[37] Willich's commentary on the events, titled "Are coloured people humans or not? The German, the American, the African," praised German attitudes towards minorities. German tolerance was demonstrated by the fact that the most mistreated people in Europe, the Jews, predominantly found homes in the German territories. In the US, continued Willich,

[35] The details of the meeting are taken from Honeck, *We are the Revolutionists*, 71-73, 94-97; cf. also August Willich, "Die Todesfeier John Browns," *Cincinnati Republikaner*, December 5, 1859.
[36] August Willich, "Die Todesfeier John Browns," *Cincinnati Republikaner*, December 5, 1859.
[37] Honeck, *An Unexpected Alliance*, 31.

African Americans, Natives, and Mexicans knew that they could trust Germans. Germans were ready to abandon their language and traditions to mingle with Americans. For these reasons the exclusions of blacks from the German Institute was an abomination.

> We are and act as Germans only when we bring up the spirit of humanity … We proudly must not concede anything to the hate, the prejudice, the hypocritical contempt for the oppressed nationalities and races, in fact we need to make ourselves strong and fight it. Only in this way will we be faithful to our people, to our race. Only in this way will we be Germans.[38]

The echo of a strong national pride resounded in these words. Willich the republican, abolitionist and supporter of human rights was also an ardent nationalist – a common mix of affiliations for the period.

Nationalism was one of the reasons why Willich abandoned the editorship of the *Cincinnati Republikaner* and enlisted in the Union army. The socialist recalled his German, American, antislavery and republican principles at the moment of taking service as Colonel of the 32nd Indiana:

> This is the patriotic answer of the Germans of Indiana to the call of their government to take up arms to protect its republican institution … In this way the Germans will really prove that they are not foreigners, and that they know how to protect their new republican homeland against the aristocracy of the South.[39]

[38] August Willich, "Zur Frage: sind die Farbigen Menschen oder nicht? Der Deutsche, der Amerikaner, der Afrikaner," *Cincinnati Republikaner*, December 27, 1859.
[39] *August Willich's Gallant Dutchmen: Civil War Letters from the 32nd Indian Infantry*, ed. Joseph R. Reinhart (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 22-23.

Willich restated the same concepts in a speech given to his regiment in 1863, when he was asked to explain why he had decided to fight with the North. "I wanted to show everyone who believes that you can only be a worthy citizen of the republic if you are born here," argued Willich "that we Germans are also republicans. I wanted to help the immigrant gain a right that they kept from him or sought to diminish."[40]

In conclusion, Willich demonstrated a proactive support for abolitionism and racial equality, which intensified after John Brown's failed raid. However, these progressive commitments did not go hand in hand with an effective conceptualisation of adequate measures to improve racial relations in the country. While denouncing the economic exploitation of black workers and racism against them, the socialist leader put forward plans that prioritised white rights and rarely contemplated the agency of black workers. Willich's case sheds light on the substantial limits to contemporary notions of racial equality – features that would recur in later socialist thought.

In 1860, Adolph Douai and Joseph Weydemeyer attended the Republican National Convention which designated Abraham Lincoln as the party's presidential candidate. From Cincinnati, Willich wrote in the *Republikaner* that the nomination of such a moderate candidate was a "stunning blow" for the radical wing of the Republican Party, yet he decided to campaign for him "for free labour, against slavery." Weydemeyer and Douai also threw their support behind the moderate Presidential candidate from Illinois. Weydemeyer moved from Chicago to New York, and he actively cooperated with Douai in the Lincoln campaign within the New York German American community.[41] By this point, the support of antebellum socialists for the cause of abolition was uniform, and in most cases it went beyond the commitment to the cause expressed by the mainstream Republican Party itself. As the cases of Douai and Willich testify, socialists used various arguments to oppose slavery.

[40] Ibid., 142.
[41] Details taken from Nimtz, *Marx, Tocqueville, and Race in America*, 72-74.

Douai applied to American slavery the categories he was familiar with, European serfdom and European authoritarianism. He thought that slavery was a moral abomination and a limitation on the Southern economy. Conversely, Willich saw in slavery a betrayal of American republicanism and a form of economic exploitation akin to that of wage workers. He fused radical republicanism and proud nationalism, in a mix founded on the rejection of any sort of discrimination based on race and national belonging.

Despite their differences, German American socialists were crucially united by their use of class and economy as analytical lenses through which to understand the issue of chattel slavery. Precisely the fact of recognising slavery as a form of economic exploitation, in the first place, was what differentiated them from Garrisonian abolitionists and from German American liberal Forty-Eighters. The focus on political economy did not prevent socialists from condemning discrimination based on race and ethnicity. In their writings, socialists stressed that racism and ethnic discrimination must be condemned and were incompatible with socialism. Ultimately, though, ideals of racial equality were explored superficially. Socialists did condemn racism from a theoretical point of view, but in practice their analyses rarely put white and black workers on the same level. When discussing how to implement racial equality, they showed a vague understanding of the socio-economic conditions of black workers, and scant interest in ways to include African Americans in the process. Socialists often appealed to ethnic pride to offer moral condemnations of slavery and racial discrimination, but they had limited understandings of the ways in which racism operated in the country, and of how socialism could operate against it.

## "The Reconstruction of a social world": Marx, the Civil War and the American working class after 1865

Karl Marx's ideas on the Civil War were in line with those of German American socialists. In fact, the father of historical materialism went even further, putting forward the idea that the Civil War could be the opening of a new phase of human history, in which workers were the protagonists of universal emancipation. In a long commentary published in the Viennese newspaper *Die Presse* in 1861, Marx wrote that "the war of the Southern Confederacy is in the true sense of the word a war of conquest for the extension and perpetuation of slavery."[42] From his position as correspondent on foreign affairs in London, he attacked the local papers which campaigned for British intervention in favour of the South to safeguard national interests. British conservative analysts argued that the American Civil War could be seen as a conflict on tariff measures (between free market supporters and protectionists), and that the South and the North could manage to exist as independent states. Conversely, for Marx the North and the South were two competing economic systems – the first founded on free labour, the second on slave labour – and their coexistence was irreparably compromised.[43] The North was constantly expanding, both in terms of population and economic power, whereas the South was stable if not decreasing. "The struggle has broken out" Marx argued "because the two systems can no longer live peacefully side by side on the North American continent. It can only be ended by the victory of one system or the other."

When the victory of the Union was finally achieved in 1865, Marx understood that with the abolition of slavery the US was going to become one of the powers of the international economic system. From London, he penned the address that the IWMA sent to Abraham Lincoln to offer his congratulations on the end of the conflict. The document stated:

[42] Karl Marx, "The North American Civil War," *Die Presse*, October 25, 1861; reprinted in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Civil War in the United States* (New York: International Publishers, 1961), 79.
[43] Ibid., 81.

> The workingmen of Europe feel sure that as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American antislavery war will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come, that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.[44]

Marx restated a similar argument in *Capital* two years later. Here he argued that in the US "every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured part of the Republic. Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in black skin." He then went on to suggest that the first movement which arose from the "death of slavery" was the eight hours' agitation, which "ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California."[45] If in the IWMA address Marx had pointed to Lincoln as the hero of the international working class, in *Capital* he reiterated his belief – albeit more cautiously – that the end of slavery had finally opened the way for the birth of a new workers' movement. But in *Capital* the socialist philosopher went also a step further in detailing the relationship between black and white workers. If only implicitly, Marx's reference to workers' skin colour, an exterior feature, reinforced the impression that he saw distinctions between white and black labourers as a merely superficial and therefore easily surmountable one. The Civil War cleared away an artificial division within the American working class that resulted from the system of slavery in the South and started a new phase, in which workers could finally cooperate in accordance with their class interests.

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[44] *Address of the International Workingmen's Association to Abraham Lincoln*, reprinted in Robin Blackburn, *Marx and Lincoln: An Unfinished Revolution* (London; New York: Verso, 2011), 212.
[45] Karl Marx, *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy* (1865; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 1:415.

During this period Marx had only sporadic contacts with his friend Weydemeyer. Had he read what the German American socialist was writing in the German American press in this period about the situation of African Americans in post-war Missouri and about the possibility of interracial cooperation between white and black workers, likely he would have been more cautious about the future prospects of the American labour movement. A couple of months after he had dismissed his battalion of voluntary German soldiers, Weydemeyer was hired as a correspondent for the St. Louis-based Republican *Westliche Post*. In the immediate aftermath of the war, his radical beliefs did not prevent him from becoming an opinion-maker at the important German American daily, an organ which, in 1867, was bought by Carl Schurz and became a landmark of Republican politics in the mid-western German-American community.[46]

Weydemeyer published articles on various topics. In 1866, he wrote a series on the new Constitution of the State of Missouri. He especially focused on the decision not to extend voting rights to African Americans, a point much discussed in the Missourian German American community.[47] In his articles Weydemeyer connected the issue of black suffrage with a wider analysis about the situation of African Americans in the South and the prospects for the American working class. The Marxist intellectual wanted to answer the question that many, especially in the Republican Party, saw as crucial for the reconstruction of the South: how was it possible to expand into the South the "Free labor" model adopted by Northern states? How could Southern states reorganise their economic and social structures in order to help spread modern industries?[48] First, Weydemeyer contended that the former class of slave-holder planter owners was useless for this task. Their objective was simply to find a way to

[46] Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer: Pioniere del Socialismo in America*, 225; Efford, *German Immigrants*, 118-119; David T. Burbank, *City of Little Bread. The St. Louis General Strike of 1877* (Unpublished microcard, 1957), 22-25.
[47] The debate on black suffrage in Missouri after the Civil War has been accurately described in Efford, *German Immigrants*, 87-114.
[48] Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction. 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), 23-28.

restore the slave-system, either by reintroducing black slavery or by finding other social classes who could perform the same labour-intensive jobs for low pay. Weydemeyer went on to analyse the prospects of Southern poor whites. He defined the ignorance of this social group as "appalling" and "astonishing", and quickly concluded that these individuals lacked the skills and the spirit to support any kind of innovative form of economic organisation.[49]

Weydemeyer contended that the only area of the South in which there were signs of economic expansion were the Sea Islands in Georgia and South Carolina. Reporting the results of an investigation carried out by the *New Yorker World*, the socialist mentioned that in those areas, free African Americans were cultivating lands and were depositing their profits in local banks. This led him to conclude that "the much despised Negroes almost exclusively represent[ed] the working element in the South, in addition to the white artisans of the cities."[50] Weydemeyer contended that the successes of the Sea Islands should be replicated elsewhere, by transferring to free African Americans the abandoned, confiscated or forfeited lands scattered around the South. At this point he reintroduced the topic of black suffrage, arguing that this project of economic reconstruction would work only insofar as "the new representatives of free labor" in the South were given the "political power" to defend their newly acquired rights. Weydemeyer, like Willich before the war, connected political freedom to economic rights. The two things necessarily went together. However, while Willich placed his emphasis on the possibilities for white workers, Weydemeyer now focused mainly on formerly enslaved black men. To those who thought that African Americans were too ignorant to exercise their voting rights, Weydemeyer replied:

> Certainly we do not want to deny that a certain degree of political education is a necessary precondition for the independent exercise of voting rights; but it is not

[49] *Westliche Post*, September 1, 1865.
[50] Ibid.

> necessary to acquire such education from books, life is the best school, and the violent conflict by which Negroes have achieved their freedom has helped them understand this more rapidly than would otherwise have been possible. All reports reassure us with rare agreement about the Negroes' desire to learn; and their efforts to acquire the education earlier laws forcibly kept away from them distinguish them favourably from the "poor white" of the South, who have not yet even woken up to the need to escape from their ignorance.[51]

For Weydemeyer, African Americans were the pillars upon which the economic system of the South should be rebuilt, and granting them full political equality was necessary to guarantee the success of his plan. The German American socialist provided one further argument in favour of black suffrage, this time connected to the circumstances of the white American working class after the end of the war. Weydemeyer voiced the concern that white workers might turn their backs on their black colleagues. "On his [the white man's] shoulders lay the burden of the taxes," wrote Weydemeyer, "while the capitalists manage to flee to secure heights; and again he begins with jealous eyes to look at the 'eternal Negro', who is still at the centre of public interest." Feeling abandoned and despised, the white worker was "thrown back on the struggle for his own narrow interests, suddenly in opposition to those with whom he had shortly before made common front against a common enemy." However, Weydemeyer warned that this might lead white workers to misunderstand "the great importance the further development of economic relations will have for him."[52] Capitalist exploitation, argued Weydemeyer, caused the difficult situation white workers experienced in the North. By giving African Americans the right to vote, the white workers would find a new ally in the fight to change these circumstances and ultimately improve their living

[51] Ibid.
[52] *Westliche Post*, September 8, 1865.

conditions: "where could he [the white worker] find these allies, if not among the workers who have a different skin color?"[53]

Weydemeyer's analysis combined a profound knowledge and understanding of local circumstances and the capacity to think strategically about the future of workers' movements. His appeal for cooperation beyond lines of race was based on class-based solidarity, and was a timely (and, as it would turn out, prescient) warning against the rise of racist and white supremacist sentiments amongst white workers. The Marxist thinker understood that an interracial alliance was the best option to advance the interests of the American working class, but he also recognised – more lucidly than Marx, in this phase – that racial tensions were a potentially lethal source of division in the cause of universal emancipation.[54]

## Socialists after the Civil War: the IWMA, the Republican Party and black workers

The situation for socialists changed radically after 1865. Weydemeyer died suddenly of cholera in 1866, a terrible blow for American Marxists in the country. Meanwhile, August Willich reaped the rewards of his much applauded service in the Union Army and became an auditor at Hamilton County, Ohio. A member of the Republican Party in the early 1870s, in 1873 he joined the "People's Party," a formation which brought together former Liberal Republicans and some Ohio Democrats. From this position, he argued that "the present irreconcilable conflict is between free labor and monopoly", namely "between on the one side the people, equal rights and general legislation, and on the other monopolists, privileges and

[53] Ibid.
[54] On Reconstruction and the labour movement, cf. the classic works W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York; London: The Free Press, 1932); David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York: Knopf, 1967). More recent accounts include: *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South*, eds. Bruce Baker and Brian Kelly (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013); David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom. Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (London; New York, Verso, 2014), 105-146.

special legislation."[55] Despite his still-active commitment to the under-privileged class, he never joined any of the socialist movements or parties that were founded in the US in this period.

In the late 1860s, New York became the main centre of socialist activities, thanks to the work of Friedrich A. Sorge, Adolph Douai (who had moved there from Boston) and other German socialists like Siegfried Meyer and August Vogt. Sorge especially played a central, albeit controversial, role as leader of the North American branch of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA) and as General Secretary of the organisation from 1872 to 1874. Historian Stan Nadel notes that, although his later achievements led scholars to characterise him as the archetypical defender of early Marxism in the US, Sorge began his political career as a radical with no interests in the philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. He fought in 1848 and 1849 for a republican Germany in which free thought and free speech were allowed. With the same spirit he joined the *Kommunisten Klub* in New York in 1857. Only in the 1860s did he become interested in Marxism.[56] Reading Marx's works convinced him that a change in the relations of production was the key to social change. However, from the very beginning of his career as a socialist leader, which started in 1867 when he wrote a letter to Marx to ask permission to open a chapter of the IWMA in New York, Sorge followed his own understanding of the theories of the founder of historical materialism. It must be stressed that in the late 1860s the relationship between trade union activism and participation in electoral politics – an issue that would create great tensions within the international socialist movement in the decades to come – had not yet been fully investigated. The IWMA was primarily a federation of trade unions, but it supported the struggles for the extension of the franchise that workers were pushing forward in the U.K.

[55] Easton, *Hegel's First American Followers,* 201-202.
[56] Stanley Nadel, "The Forty-Eighters and the Politics of Class in New York City," in *The German Forty-Eighters in the United States*, ed. Charlotte Brancaforte (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 52-53.

and other parts of Europe in the late 1860s.[57] Conversely, since the beginning of his activism in the IWMA Sorge had expressed a clear-cut position on this debate by adamantly supporting trade unionism as opposed to participation in party politics. Sorge reached this conviction by observing the specific conditions of American labour, therefore moving away independently from the recommendations of Karl Marx.[58]

In *The Yankee International* (1998), Timothy Messer-Kruse argues that the failure of the IWMA in the US was caused by the profound division between its German American membership, led by Sorge, and its American membership, a variegated coalition whose most representative leaders were the Clafin sisters – the group Messer-Kruse calls "the Yankee International." The struggle peaked in 1871, when the German American leadership led by Sorge managed to exclude the American sections on the grounds that they were populated by the middle class bourgeoisies who were not interested in workers' rights. Sorge's coup, according to Messer-Kruse, strangled in its infancy a genuinely American movement that could have been a protagonist of the American left in the years to come, and condemned socialists to decades of irrelevance.[59]

Messer-Kruse contends that the "Yankee International" was the only organisation in the socialist camp that fully "embraced the black worker" by recognising African Americans' identity "as not only wage laborers but also a persecuted minority whose basic republican liberties needed to be defended."[60] Conversely, German American Marxists "sacrificed their Internationalist and egalitarian ideology to the practical necessities of recruiting Irish workers

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[57] Henry Collins and Chimen Abramsky, *Karl Marx and the British Labour Movement: Years of the First International* (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965).
[58] *Resolutions on the political action of the I.W.A., adopted by the Congress held at Philadelphia, on the 11th, 12th and 13th April, 1874*, Reel 2, International Workingmen's Association Papers, Microfilmed edition, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam; Karl Marx to Hermann Meyer, July 4, 1868, in Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels, *Letters to Americans: 1848-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), 74-75. An extensive biographical profile of Sorge is: Philip S. Foner, *Friedrich Adolph Sorge: "Father of Modern Socialism in America,"* in Sorge, *Friedrich A. Sorge's Labor Movement in the United States*, 3-41.
[59] Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International: Marxism and the American Reform Tradition, 1848-1876* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).
[60] Ibid., 195.

and established trade unions into the IWA."[61] According to Messer-Kruse, the victory of Sorge's faction over the "Yankee International" had far-reaching consequences: the race- and gender-exclusivist trade unionism which triumphed with Samuel Gompers's American Federation of Labor in the early twentieth century was, he argues, primarily the product of an approach promoted by Marxists like Sorge and his German American comrades in the International in the early 1870s.[62]

Messer-Kruse misreads German American socialist thought. The thesis defended in *The Yankee International* needs to be contextualised within changes in the American labour mentality that started before the Civil War and fully materialised during Reconstruction. In his seminal book on the work ethic in the United States between 1850 and 1920, Daniel T. Rodgers argues that in the postbellum scenario the transformation of the American economy from agricultural to industrial brought a redefinition of the concept of work. In the mid-nineteenth century, moralists such as Thomas Carlyle and Henry Ward Beecher successfully connected the idea of work with that of rectitude and frugality. A virtuous worker, they contended, was a virtuous individual. This idea, originally articulated in an agricultural environment, populated by "artisans' shop, farms, and countinghouses," did not disappear with the transition to an industrial society. On the contrary, Rodgers maintains that the connection between work and morality was reinforced to a "new level of abstraction" and continued to characterise American society well into the twentieth century.[63]

It was the defence of the work ethic, as described by Rodgers, that united workers in their support for the eight-hour movement in the aftermath of the Civil War. Workers were forced into contracts, but still they saw the reduction of work hours as a way to defend their independence and humanity. One of the most famous slogans of the protest was "eight hours

[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 216, 255.
[63] Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), XI-XV.

for work, eight hours for recreation, rest, eight hours for sleep."[64] These few words precisely captured the meaning of the protest. The eight hours of rest and recreation guaranteed the possibility of cultivating family relations and friendships, but they also provided the chance to participate in the democratic life of the country, by attending lectures and cultural events. Labelled by historians as "labor republicanism," this set of values continued to characterise the American working class in the 1870s and 1880s, becoming the cornerstone upon which some of the most important workers' organisations of the Gilded Age (such as the Knights of Labor in the 1880s) were built.[65]

But postbellum defenders of "labor republicanism" faced new questions: were African Americans, Chinese and European immigrants entitled to enjoy the privileges of the "free labor" ideology white American workers demanded for themselves? Could the American work force be not only multi-ethnic, but also multiracial? While in the 1850s, Know-Nothing "nativist" arguments stimulated discussions about ethnicity and access to American citizenship, after 1865 Northern white workers found themselves debating the consequences of having a racially-diverse labour force.

By the end of the 1860s, the situation in the American labour movement reached a paradoxical turning point: on the one hand, a progressive movement of white Northern American workers, the National Labor Union, fought to claim back their economic and civil independence and make the eight-hour workday a reality. This movement included conservative elements that opposed the integration of African American members, yet its leader William Sylvis was genuinely committed to racial equality and starting from 1869 its general assemblies featured black delegates. On the other hand, a growing movement of

[64] "Hurrah! For the Working Men of New York," handbill of Central Working Men's Society, Pittsburgh and Environs, May, 1872, in W.S.H.S. Labor Collection. Quoted in David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 239.
[65] Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: the Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Joseph Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2007). A critical treatment of the category of republicanism can be found in Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: the career of a concept," *The Journal of American History* 79, No. 1 (Jun. 1992), 11-38.

black workers, who from 1869 were organised in the Colored National Labor Union founded by Isaac Myers, fought to be fully integrated within the ranks of white trade unions and to have their social, political and economic rights respected in the South. Crucially, these two movements clashed, and ultimately split, over disagreements on political strategy and the role of the Republican Party. While white workers thought that the GOP, which had led Reconstruction until that moment promising to embrace workers' rights, was letting them down to defend the interest of Northern capitalists, black workers had no other options but to maintain their alliance with the Republicans, because they were the only ones who could prevent the return of the Democrats to power.[66] Messer-Kruse narrates these events accurately, but oversimplifies the extent to which white racism caused the interracial alliance of 1870-71 to fail. Racism certainly played a key role in this, but understanding its significance requires a fuller contextualization of the American socialist movement, and especially the varied positions of German Americans.

The point is that socialists thought, in accordance with the NLU, that by claiming a shorter workday and better living conditions for workers they would work in the interests of black and white workers alike. Even though they did not ground this position in the "labor republicanism" of their American colleagues, in this moment they shared the same political strategy for the advancement of the American working class. In this, the members of the IWMA were supported by the enthusiasm of their leader Karl Marx, who had recognised in the eight-hour movement a central component of the international fight for the emancipation of workers.[67]

The German American paper *Arbeiter Union* offered an insight into the position of German American socialists in this period. The *Arbeiter Union* was founded in 1866 as the

[66] The classic history of the NLU is David Montgomery's *Beyond Equality*. However, this book provides very little information on African American organisations. More recent accounts include: Messer-Kruse, *The Yankee International*, 188-194; Paul Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor: a New History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 20-32; Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*, 162-163.
[67] Sorge, *Friedrich A. Sorge's Labor Movement in the United States*, 8-15.

weekly of the homonymous federation of German American trade unions. In 1869 the organisation was very close to the IWMA led by Sorge, and in turn the two organisations operated jointly with the National Labor Union.[68] The editor of the paper was Adolph Douai, who in the late 1860s was becoming an ardent supporter of Marxian socialism.[69] The German American paper published articles which analysed the behaviour of the African American electorate. One was about a state election held in Virginia in July 1869, where African Americans had overwhelmingly voted for the newly formed Conservative Party against the GOP. The *Arbeiter Union* applauded the political intelligence and flexibility of the black electorate, and interpreted this shift as a sign of the disappearance of the North-South conflict within local elections. As the Mason-Dixon line no longer structured American political relations, the article argued, a new line would reshape the US electoral map. Earlier the dispute was between the capitalists who owned their workers (in the south) and the capitalists who hired their workers (in the north); but, with the abolition of slavery, the dispute had turned into a conflict between capital and the "workers of all colours who acknowledge no masters and no rule of the Capital." The clash between capital and the multiracial working class would characterise post-Civil War America, now that "the Union [was] completely restored."[70] Socialists saw another sign of this progressive realignment of American politics in the birth of the Colored National Labor Union. In December 1869, the *Arbeiter Union* wrote that from now on white workers would have "allies against all attacks of capital" if they wanted to move South.[71]

[68] "Die Internationale Arbeiter Association and die National Arbeiter-Union der Vereinigten Staaten," *Arbeiter Union*, June 2, 1869; Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, 165-168.
[69] Selig Perlman, "Upheaval and Reorganisation (from 1877)," in John Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, (New York: MacMillan Company, 1935-1936), 2:223-224; Stan Nadel, *The German Immigrant Left in the United States*, in *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, eds. Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 53-54.
[70] "Die Wahl in Virginien," *Arbeiter Union*, July 9, 1869.
[71] "Die weißen und die schwarzen Arbeiter," *Arbeiter Union*, December 1869.

While showing optimism for the birth of class solidarity among workers, socialists also stressed the continuation of significant problems connected to the situation of African Americans in the country. Mostly, the criticisms of socialists were combined with attacks on the Republican Party, whose role in the reconstruction of the country was being openly contested. Writing in a notebook dedicated to IWMA Section One's activities, in 1869 Friedrich A. Sorge discussed race discrimination and demonstrated a bitter awareness of the situation. The immediate issue at stake for Sorge was the fact that printers' unions were ignoring blacks and women and refusing to include them among its ranks. "Now what is the reason?" wondered Sorge "only this, they are disenfranchised classes, hence degraded in the world of labor." His piece consisted of a comparative analysis of the problem of race and sex discrimination. On race, specifically, he wrote:

> The truth is, the people generally hate the African color and race. Many of the Repub[lican] leaders would yield and be glad to yield the negro back in the hands of his masters and give the rebel states back to rebel. These are the leaders, sovereign over the whole party policy… they are the party and Grant is but the clay in the hand of a terrible pastor, Mr. Phillips himself being witness.[72]

Sorge viewed pessimistically the progressive disengagement of the Republican Party from programmes in favour of African Americans promoted by its Radical wing in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. According to Sorge, President Grant was but a puppet in the hands of the leaders of the party, who were no longer interested in finding solutions for the improvement of the living conditions of African Americans. By mentioning the abolitionist leader Wendell Phillips, Sorge implied that even the abolitionist movement was no longer

[72] Notebook, 1868, Reel 1, International Workingmen's Association Papers, Microfilmed edition, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

able to deliver anything to the African American community. The German American leader further claimed: "We deem it of little consequence who governs, so as both parties are in the interest of the few against the many, of capital against labor, of men black and white, against women."[73] The core of Sorge's analysis was structured around the concepts of class and labour. African Americans and women were rejected by the union because they were "disenfranchised classes," namely because they lacked the economic power to enforce respect for their rights.

This approach explains why socialists struggled to understand continued African American support for the Republican Party. The above article on the foundation of the Colored National Labor Union offered an instance of wishful thinking on this issue. It argued that, while Republicans were doing everything they could to keep African American workers in their ranks, including sending the black congressman John Mercer Langston to deliver a speech at the assembly, soon the black electorate would pursue its class interests and support the party that the NLU intended to found. But despite the optimism of the *Arbeiter Union* commentator, two years later the situation was still the same: in a document sent to the General Council of the IWMA in June 1871, Sorge reported the news of a strike among African American workers in Washington D.C. being defeated through the use of white strike-breakers. The socialist leader expressed his hope that this act of scabbing would foster African Americans' resentment and result in "the emancipation of the colored workingmen from the grip of the political suckers who kept them till now almost exclusively in the ranks of the so called Republican Party".[74]

In sum, in the postbellum German American socialist movement there were those who, like Sorge, clearly acknowledged that the abolition of slavery had not caused the disappearance of racism – in fact, Sorge went further by accusing the heralds of African

[73] Ibid.
[74] "To the General Council of the I.W.A.", June 1871. Miscellaneous typescript documents. Reel 3, International Workingmen's Association Papers, Microfilmed edition, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

Americans' rights, the Republican Party and the abolitionist movement, of being unable and unwilling to work further for the achievement of full racial equality. On the other hand, the hope expressed by Sorge and the *Arbeiter Union* that African Americans would abandon the protection of the Republican Party revealed their failure to adequately understand the conditions of black workers in the country. Ultimately, German American socialists were trapped in the same contradiction that characterised the NLU: while this federation conducted a strongly progressive fight to acquire not only formal but also economic rights for its members, at the same time its leaders failed to realise that black workers could not follow them on the same path, because they still needed to see their basic social and civil rights fully affirmed.

## German American socialists after the IWMA: towards a new politics of race

By the early 1870s, the survival of the International was jeopardised by continued internal fights. Especially the profound theoretical gulf that separated followers of Marx' trade unionism and supporters of Michael Bakunin's anarchism had brought the organisation to a complete political paralysis. The Hague congress in 1872 was the peak of the fight between Marxists and Bakunians for control over the International. Marx's supporters won and managed to exclude anarchists, but the decision to move the General Committee of the IWMA to New York essentially meant the death of the organisation. Despite Sorge's efforts, keeping contacts alive with European sections was almost impossible, and the International rapidly became nothing more than a paper organisation. However, the slow disappearance of the IWMA was not the end of socialist activism in these years. Sections of the International around the country survived separated from the Central Committee (for example in St. Louis), whilst some others turned into associations seeking to found socialist outposts in the South

(New Orleans), and others remained faithful to the "rebel" Spring Street Council run by the "Yankee International" (Philadelphia).[75] Furthermore, other parties with a socialist credo were founded in these years. Some exiles of the International located in Newark and Philadelphia founded the Social-Democratic Party of North America in 1874. Others, helped by the constant influx of new socialist activists from Germany, opened the Workingmen's Party of Illinois (WPI) in Chicago.

These new socialist organisations severed their ties with the IWMA and the NLU and thus did not follow the strategy formulated by Sorge and the *Arbeiter Union* in the early 1870s. The vital and booming Chicago German American socialist community expressed original and innovative opinions.[76] The *Chicagoer Vorbote*, the weekly of the WPI, published several pieces analysing the situation of African Americans in the South. A series of articles, written by an anonymous German labourer who had moved to the South in the summer of 1874, gave a first-hand perspective on racial relations in the post-Civil War South. In an introductory piece titled "Capital against labour, or the white-baiting against Negroes", the German workingman gave a contradictory mix of messages. On the one hand he accused former white slave-holders of still keeping African Americans under their control and manoeuvring the economy of the state; on the other hand he lamented the unfair treatment of white employers and workingmen by black public authorities, which were normally inclined to be sympathetic towards African Americans. The German socialist focused on African Americans because he believed that they were the only existing working class in the South. Debating politics, he reported what he heard during his lunch-breaks – that black workers

[75] David T. Burbank, "The First International in St. Louis," in *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 18 (Jan. 1962), 163-171; Michel Cordillot, *Aux Origines du Socialisme Moderne: Le Première International, la Commune de Paris, l'Exil* (Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2010).
[76] John B. Jentz and Richard Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital: Class, Politics and Democracy During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 152-170; James Green, *Death in the Haymarket: a Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing that Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 49-51.

were sick of their support for the Republican Party because they did not trust white politicians.[77]

But the more he remained in the South the more the confusion seemed to disappear from his mind. The German socialist started to identify the underlying dynamics of discrimination and decided which side he wanted to take. Soon after his opening article, the socialist reported two lynchings of African Americans, which occurred "simply because [they] have the misfortune of being coloured."[78] It took him one more month to declare that "there are many socialist features among the coloureds, and they can easily become our best Party's comrades". The author, in fact, contended that from several points of view African Americans were actually better than Northern whites, because their minds were less "poisoned" and more receptive than those of the allegedly free white workers. "I meet here among the Negroes more sincerity and less sense of subjection than what I found in the industrial cities of the North, for example New York, where I worked for several years". And if in this article he was already convinced that "here English-speaking socialists would have a good field for agitation,"[79] in the last article sent to the *Chicagoer Vorbote* in December 1874 the German socialist provided the most complete analysis of the situation, speaking openly of a "race war" that was tearing the South apart. The journalist was now aware that the "race question" completely influenced the way in which politics was organised. "Skin colour made the party colour," and, as a consequence, "the party struggle was become a race struggle." However, since most African Americans were wage workers, the race struggle was essentially a "class struggle, a struggle between the exploiters and the exploited." Blacks needed to use their voting rights carefully, otherwise the ruling class would not hesitate to "intern them into a reservation," as they were doing with Native Americans. Politicians,

[77] "Kapital gegen Arbeit oder die Weißenhetze gegen die Neger," *Chicagoer Vorbote*, September 19, 1874.
[78] "Die Farbigen im Süden," *Chicagoer Vorbote*, September 26, 1874.
[79] "Aus dem Süden," *Chicagoer Vorbote,* October 17, 1874.

contended the socialist, were nothing more than "practical Darwinists," who were trying to enforce the idea that natural laws threatened the survival of anyone but the Caucasian race.

The German American correspondent of the *Chicagoer Vorbote* pushed his understanding of the relationship between race and class much further than many of his Northern comrades writing at the time. He clearly understood how dynamics connected to race discrimination still influenced and organised Southern society. Race discrimination pervaded politics and economics, was reflected in the enforcement of civil rights and created pervasive forms of social ghettoisation. By declaring that "the white worker sees now in the coloured workers a fellow sufferer, who sighs with him under the same yoke of wage slavery,"[80] the German American correspondent reiterated his adhesion to the socialist approach based on class solidarity. However, he coupled it with the awareness that in the US South class meant race, namely that racial discrimination was but a veiled way to perpetrate the dynamic of economic oppression experienced by freed black workers.

The opinions expressed by the anonymous correspondent of the *Chicagoer Vorbote* attest to the ways in which German Americans attempted to rearticulate the socialist point of view in order to integrate racial equality into their goals. But they also point to another aspect of the problem, something that will be thoroughly discussed in the fourth chapter of this thesis: socialist opinions on the "race question" were strongly influenced by the geographical position of the individual that formulated them. It was by spending a considerable amount of time in South Carolina, a state with a sixty per cent African American population, that the *Vorbote* correspondent achieved the profound awareness that race shaped social and economic relations in the South – an awareness which was lacking in the opinions of Sorge

[80] "Die Rassenkampf im Süden," *Chicagoer Vorbote,* December 26, 1874.

and in the articles on the *Arbeiter Union*, and in the thinking of many other German American socialists as well.[81]

## Conclusions

In the period before and after the Civil War, German American socialists were builders, supporters, and finally victims of the illusion that the abolition of chattel slavery in the South could be a prelude to a new epoch of extended workers' rights. By actively joining the chorus of voices that advocated an end to chattel slavery, socialists not only wished to participate in the political life of their new country, but they were also enthusiastic about a radical fight that seemed to lead the way towards unexplored horizons. To oppose slavery meant to campaign against the conservative powers of the country, to subvert its fundamental economic structures and to impose measures that put the interests of working people centre stage. The achievement of the objective provoked an enthusiasm that is perfectly captured in the message Karl Marx sent to Abraham Lincoln at the end of the war.

Socialists were consistent in their behaviour after 1865. Class relations, economic conditions, and materialist structures remained their principal angle of analysis. However, whereas before the war this perspective put them on the most progressive side of the political spectrum, in the post-war period it led socialists far from the cutting edge of national radicalism. Before the war, German American socialists, together with liberal Forty-Eighters, contributed to moving the Republican Party towards abolitionist positions. After the war, by joining the Northern white working class within the National Labor Union, socialists favoured an approach that sidelined their commitment to racial equality. But the problems experienced by socialists in the IWMA should not lead one to conclude that the German

[81] Population percentage from: Francis A. Walker, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 10-12.

American socialist movement was instrumental in creating a racial and ethnic exclusivist trade union movement, as suggested by Messer-Kruse in *The Yankee International*. As the case of the *Chicagoer Vorbote* correspondent attests, already in the mid-1870s socialists outside the IWMA looked for new ways to address the problem of race from a socialist point of view. The foundation of the Workingmen's Party of the United States in 1876 was to consolidate the opening of a new phase in the development of American socialist racial thought, a new phase that the next chapter will analyse by using ethnicity and the transnational dimension of the socialist movement as the key critical lenses.

# "GEOGRAPHIES OF MEN:" ETHNICITY AND RACIAL THINKING IN THE SLP, 1876-1882

There are two possible ways to investigate how ethnicity shaped the history of the American socialist movement in the 1870s and 1880s. The first is focusing on the German immigrant experience and the ways in which it affected the performance of the movement in the formative period of its life. Numerous scholars have taken this approach, concluding that ethnic insularity was a key weakness of early American socialist organisations such as the Socialist Labor Party (SLP). In the period that goes from its foundation in 1876 to the early 1890s, 80 to 90 per cent of the SLP's membership had German as a first language; this made it incredibly difficult to spread the party's cause outside German American circles.[1] The ethnic insularity of German American activists significantly influenced the wider perception of socialism as an "un-American" idea, whose failure in the US was inevitable as a result.[2] The second approach, largely neglected by historians, considers the intellectual history of German thought, with specific regards to race, and the ways in which it influenced the flourishing of German American radical communities in the US. This is the approach that this chapter will utilise to discuss ideas of race in the SLP. How, in practice, did the ethnic origin

[1] The party did not keep regular lists of members. It is, therefore, difficult to reconstruct the precise dimension of the different ethnic groups with the party. However, scholars agree on placing the percentage of German Americans between the 80 and the 90 per cent. Cf.: Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (1903; repr., New York: Russel & Russel, 1965), 213; Hartmut Keil, *German Working-Class Immigration and the Social Democratic Tradition of Germany*, in *German Workers' Culture in the United States 1850 to 1920*, ed. Hartmut Keil (Washington; London DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), 7.

[2] See for example Seymour M. Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here. Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 138; Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States. A History of the American Left*, 3rd ed. (London; New York: Verso, 2013), 19-57;

of SLP members form their beliefs on racial diversity? What remained of their German cultural background, and how was it hybridised with American ideas? What outcomes did their German-grown ideas about racial diversity produce, once transplanted into America's strongly multiracial and multi-ethnic society? Answering these questions will shed light on the peculiar ways in which American socialism flourished at the very beginning of its history in the country.

Observing the vast diversity of the American working class, composed of people originating from Europe, Central America and Asia, it is tempting to consider the German American community as one homogenous entity among the others. In fact, even among German speakers there was a great diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Different geographic areas not only reflected different socio-economic conditions, but different countries as well. During the nineteenth century the central European area in which German culture was predominant repeatedly changed its boundaries and its geopolitical features. This provoked an alteration in the ways in which people of German origin in the US identified themselves. What is more, the period of peak German immigration created noticeable differences. During the nineteenth century, various waves of German immigrants arrived in the US, each with its own unique characteristics.[3]

Geographical, cultural and generational differences between German immigrants intersected with changes in the way in which theories of race were discussed in pre-unification Germany in the nineteenth century. In the first decades of the century it was commonplace to discuss the topic of human difference using culture and language as the key analytical framework. Romanticism and idealism favoured theories that aimed to provide holistic conceptions of nature, with Alexander von Humboldt being perhaps the most influential representative of this tendency. Concurrently, linguists explained the evolution of

[3] On the features of German immigration in the US, cf. Stan Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845-1880* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 13-26.

human cultures through the analysis of language: by reconstructing the connections between the grammatical rules of different languages, they put forward original hypotheses to explain the historical movements of populations. Yet this framework changed over time, as scientific-based analyses of human differences increased in prominence, especially thanks to the studies of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. This tendency was definitively consolidated by the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Darwinism enjoyed widespread popularity in Germany. In fact, it rapidly spread as a method to settle social, political and economic problems, thanks to the work of influential "apostles" of the doctrine like Ernst Haeckel and Oscar Schmidt.[4]

German American socialist perceptions of race and ethnic diversity reflected the origins of their protagonists. Scientific racialism and Darwinian approaches abounded in the German American literature. In the work of early immigrants, like Douai, it is possible to observe the influence of pre-Darwinian and holistic approaches, whereas for latecomers like Grottkau the influence of Darwinism is almost totalising. The German background was not the only origin of these influences, of course. Scientific racialism and Darwinism were equally widespread in the late nineteenth century public debate in the US. However, the way in which German American socialists framed them is unique, and was affected by their interaction with the German-speaking intellectual context.

Theories of race provided socialists of the 1870s and 1880s with methods to rationalise and structure their discourses about ethnic and racial diversity, and the relation they had with economic dynamics. These discourses rarely went together with exclusivist nationalist ideas

[4] Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Sara Eigen Figal and Mark Larrimore, *The German Invention of Race* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006); Daniel Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism: Social Darwinism in the Ernst Haeckel and the German Monist League* (London: Macdonald, 1971); Alfred Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin: the Popularization of Darwinism in Germany,1860-1914* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Richard Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1999); Robert J. Richards, *The Tragic Sense of Life: Ernst Haeckel and the Struggle over Evolutionary Thought* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

or supremacist beliefs based on "Aryan" and "Teutonic" mythologies; nor did they automatically turn into racist positions against minorities.[5] However, more often than not they opened the way to disenchanted political strategies, where the differences between races were accepted as fixed. Furthermore, they helped create evolutionary conceptions of development, where socialism was envisaged as the future step of human development. These theories had a disturbing self-justificatory aspect, postulating that the solution to racial conflicts could not be found at this stage of the development of human history and should be postponed until the creation of a future socialist state.

However, not all German American socialists used Darwinism and theories of race to discuss the situation of racial minorities in the US. For a group of militants, usually former members of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA), inter-ethnic and interracial conflicts were not matters that biology could explain. On the contrary, these conflicts needed to be interpreted as consequences of the capitalist dynamics of economic production. This group was led by, amongst others, Friedrich A. Sorge, and its approach was consistent with the internationalist point of view ascribed to the German American group of the IWMA in Chapter 1. The members of this group were mainly Forty-Eighters, who had forged their radical beliefs during the Springtime of the Peoples, and had experienced the Civil War and Reconstruction in the US. The expansive and universalist breadth of the 1848 ideals made them deaf to the mounting appeal of exclusivist nationalism. Furthermore, the years spent in the US made them disillusioned with party politics. This group advocated trade unionism as the key strategy to improve the conditions of American workers. With its focus on piecemeal improvements, workers' economic organisation and its fully inclusive attitude without any regard for colour or nationality, this group anticipated many attitudes embraced in the 1880s by the Knights of Labor.

[5] The model of racial and exclusivist nationalism I refer to is described in: Reginal Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: the Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Scientific racialism and colour-blind internationalism were the two most common approaches among socialists to the problem of inter-ethnic and interracial conflict. This distinction reflected the internal divisions within the SLP. At its foundation in 1876, the party was divided between a trade unionist and a pro-electoral politics faction. The trade-unionist faction was split between New York and Chicago, and included former IWMA members and the activists of the Workingmen's Party of Illinois. The pro-political faction was more evenly diffused among the areas where the SLP had spread, but the East Coast-based ex-members of the Social Democratic Party of North America formed its most pro-active component. Clearly, not everyone in the SLP had German American origins. Second in size was the English-language group, with its American, English and Irish members. Their role in the organisation was peculiar: they were a minority, but often they held key logistical position because of their language skills. For example, the most vocal leader of the pro-political faction was Peter J. McGuire, a second-generation Irish American and future founder of the American Federation of Labor.

Members of the party attempted to combine colour-blind internationalism and scientific racialism, but political quarrels rapidly re-emerged and forced the strongest trade unionist group, led by Sorge, to abandon the organisation. By 1879, colour-blind internationalism was a minority position in the SLP, with the party ultimately led by members who were at ease with scientific racialist and Darwinist approaches. By reconstructing the factional disputes at the origins of the SLP, this chapter sheds light on the intellectual origins of opinions of race defended in the party, placing them in a transatlantic context that emphasises the diversity of ethnic backgrounds as the key analytic lens.

## Scientific racialism and Darwinism in the German American socialist movement: the case of Adolph Douai

On July 19th 1876, the Germania Hall in Philadelphia hosted a meeting with participants representing the past, present and future of American socialism. After a phase of factional conflicts between the different regional parties that made up the movement, American socialists had decided to follow the example of their German counterparts who came together in the *Sozialistische Arbeiter Partei Deutschlands* in 1875. With some 3,000 workers from across the country represented, the founding committee formed in Philadelphia in 1876 turned four organisations (the North American section of the International Workingmen's Association, the Workingmen's Party of Chicago, the Social Democratic Party of North America, and the Socio-political Workingmen's Society of Cincinnati) into a single national association, the Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS). The WPUS, in 1877 renamed the Socialist Labor Party, was the first national socialist party ever founded in the US. The founding committee approved the platform and constitution, organised the press, and placed the main organs of the party in Chicago (the National Executive Committee) and in New Haven (the Board of Supervisors). In sum, it codified all the conditions to start a solid and efficient national movement, devoted to expanding and propagating the socialist message among American workers. During the Congress, conflicts were temporarily settled, even though the proceedings of the meeting clearly showed the existence of conflicting opinions. Socialists were fundamentally divided on political strategy: some believed that party politics was the royal road to improve the conditions of workingmen; others were disenchanted with bourgeois politics and supported trade unionism instead.[6]

Divisions over political strategy overlapped with ethnic and generational differences. The composition of the founding committee is revealing: out of seven members, there were

[6] Philip S. Foner, *The Formation of the Workingmen's Party of the United States: Proceedings of the Union Congress Held at Philadelphia, July 19-22, 1876* (New York: American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1876).

veteran Forty-Eighters and Marxists like Friedrich A. Sorge, second-generation Germans like Otto Weydemeyer (the son of Joseph), recent German-speaking immigrants like Carl Conzett and Adolph Strasser, but also second-generation Irish radicals like Peter J. McGuire, a 24-year-old carpenter from New York. At the foundation of the party, the membership of the WPUS was predominantly German. However, we should not be too quick to conclude that German socialists in the SLP were a homogeneous group. As carefully reconstructed by historian Stan Nadel, it is possible to divide German immigration to the US into three waves. To summarise, the first wave lasted from 1840 to 1865 and was generally made up of skilled artisans hailing from the southern and western areas of the German states (mostly Bavaria and the Rhineland). This wave commingled with a flow of political immigrants who sailed to the US after the failure of the 1848-49 revolts. The second wave, from 1865 to 1880, was different in origin and composition. During this period many people came not from the south and the west but from the agrarian areas of central Prussia, Hanover and the Mecklenburgs. Little information is available about the third wave (1880-1900), as the precise birthplace of German immigrants was no longer recorded in the US census after 1880.[7] However, it needs to be mentioned that, after 1878 and for the following decade, another wave of political immigration followed the enactment of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and the passage of anti-socialist laws.[8]

Nadel also provides useful information about the American destination of German immigrants. First of all, he argues that, even though most of them came from rural areas, they contributed significantly to the urbanisation of the US. In 1860, when only 16 per cent of Americans lived in towns with a population of 8,000 or more, 36 per cent of German-born immigrants lived in cities of more than 25,000 people. Furthermore, German immigration showed strong patterns of regionalism even within each city. Mecklenburgers lived almost

[7] Nadel, *Little Germany*, 19.
[8] Keil, *German Working-Class Immigration*.

entirely in the Mid-West, mostly in Chicago (55 per cent) and Milwaukee (37 per cent); Austrians were split between St. Louis (45 per cent) and New York (31 per cent), whereas most Württembergers were in New York (56 per cent), with very few in St. Louis (15 per cent). "It is thus clear," concludes Nadel, "that there were many different German migrations from different parts of Germany. Each migration had its own settlement pattern in America's cities, or even within each of its cities".[9] It is not surprising, then, that the debates about race within the party took diverging, almost opposing paths. The SLP's membership was a reproduction in miniature of all the ethnic, relational, and political dynamics that characterised the late nineteenth-century German community. It is probable that the same socio-economic and culturally stratified composition characterised the socialist movement in Germany, but in the US there was the further complication of two groups that were absent in Germany: the first-generation German immigrants, who had spent decades in the US and had developed properly German American styles of life; and non-German speaking socialists, a minority, of course, but a vocal and important one.

The early SLP organised its political life around newspapers: at its foundation, it had two German-language weeklies (the *Arbeiter Stimme* and the *Chicagoer Vorbote*) and one English-speaking (the *Labor Standard*).[10] Progressively, trade unionists came together around the *Labor Standard* and the *Chicagoer Vorbote*, whereas political actionists took control of the *Arbeiter Stimme*. One of the few individuals (perhaps the only one) who worked on all three newspapers was Adolph Douai. During the founding Congress, when the party press was organised, Douai was appointed assistant editor for all the three SLP newspapers.[11] This is key, because Douai was one of the most prolific writers on the theories of race in the late 1870s and early 1880s. His articles, circulated by the three newspapers (although mostly the German-language ones), reached a vast readership among German American socialists.

[9] Nadel, *Little Germany*, 23.
[10] Foner, *The Formation*, 16-19.
[11] Ibid., 17.

In his autobiography, Adolph Douai claimed that in 1848 he already described himself as "a professor of the theory of evolution in natural science."[12] Later on in the book he went even further, writing that in the late 1850s he would have included himself among the Germans that were "Darwinians before Darwin," for without any training in natural history he could trace the origin of humankind from animals and reconstruct the link between geographical conditions and evolution of animals well before the English scientist published *On the Origin of Species*.[13] Douai called his area of enquiry the "geography of men." He published several articles under this title throughout his entire career, the first one in the *San Antonio Zeitung* in 1854. He also wrote a book on the topic, called *Land und Leute in der Union* ("Land and People in the Union") which was published in 1864, and where he discussed the history of the US through the prism of his theories of human development.[14]

Douai's interest in the "geography of men" attests to the diffusion of scientific theories of evolution in the German American intellectual context, and of the radical impact that Darwinism had on this field of enquiry. But it also demonstrates that during the late nineteenth-century debates on evolutionism developed in partial and incoherent ways: by equating Darwin's theory to a simplistic version of geographic determinism and by defining himself as a "Darwinian before Darwin," Douai showed that his understanding of the theory of transmutation formulated by the English scientist was limited, to say the least.

This confusion, by no means confined to Douai, was the result of the complicated process whereby the scientific debate on evolution unfolded between the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, and how this intertwined with analyses of political, economic and social interactions. In the eighteenth century, as geographical discoveries prompted stories of

[12] Adolph Douai, *Autobiography of Dr. Adolf Douai, Revolutionist of 1848, Texas Pioneer, Introducer of the Kindergarten, Educator, Author, Editor, 1819-1888*, trans. and ed. Richard H. Douai Böker, 1959, Folder 2, Adolph Douai Papers, Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas, 37.
[13] Ibid., 144.
[14] Adolph Douai, "Die Geographie der Menschen," *San Antonio Zeitung*, April 4, 1854; Adolph Douai, *Land und Leute in der Union* (Berlin: Otto Janke, 1864).

exotic populations from different areas of the world, intellectuals started to theorise reasons for human physical and cultural differences.[15] For example, in his magnum opus *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), the French intellectual Charles Louis de Secondat de Montesquieu elaborated a model according to which environmental circumstances decided not only human attitudes but also political and social features of the different human groups: climate and geography explained why despotism and slavery were particularly common in Asia, whereas monarchies, republics and more liberal costumes proliferated in temperate areas like Europe.[16]

In the nineteenth century, naturalists and geographers started to ground their theses with first-hand data acquired from explorations and fieldwork. Geological observation led to the widely held belief that the earth was in constant evolution. Many extended this idea to the organic world, and suggested that both animals and humans were the product of centuries-long processes of evolution. But then the question to answer was: how was evolution possible? In what way had living beings changed across time?[17] One of the most credited replies was Lamarckism, a more sophisticated and scientifically grounded version of the geographic determinism theorised by Montesquieu. Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) expounded a theory that suggested that living beings developed physical features according to the surrounding geographical environment. According to Lamarckism, humans and animals could pass characteristics developed during their lifetime to their offspring. For example, the necks of giraffes had stretched because of the animals' repeated attempts to reach the furthest leaves on trees.[18]

Evolutionary theories of the human species were inevitably connected to religious, moral and political discourses. At stake here were no longer the mechanisms of the evolution

[15] Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 45.
[16] Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748; repr. New York: The Colonial Press, 1899), 224; Hilary Bok, "Baron de Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat," *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2014 Edition), accessed March 10, 2016, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/montesquieu/.
[17] Peter J. Bowler, *Evolution. The History of an Idea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 90-150.
[18] Bowler, *Evolution*, 156-164.

of animals across millennia of biological development. Evolutionism had started an intellectual clash that was reshaping all-encompassing perceptions of the real nature of humankind. In the nineteenth century, the control of religious authorities over natural scientists was fading, and, even if creationism still held a strong appeal, scientists were free to formulate hypotheses that went against the literal reading of the Bible. A group of thinkers, usually labelled "polygenesists", suggested that African Americans and people of other races were so strikingly different because they were not created at the same time as the white race. Historian Reginald Horsman argues that these scientists were moved by a deeply engrained need to situate the white race at a higher position in the scale of human development. "At the heart of the polygenetic position," contends Horsman "was a refusal to believe that other people who appeared in every way 'savage' and physically different could have sprung from the same ancestors." In some cases, polygenetic positions combined with anti-evolutionism: not only were all the other races inferior to whites, but also this inferiority was cast in stone and biologically fixed.[19]

According to a recent biography of Charles Darwin by Adrian Desmond and James Moore, Darwin was moved to formulate his revolutionary theory of evolution by a desire to refute the polygenetic theory of human races.[20] Shifting the focus away from all the anti-religious polemic influenced by Darwin's theory, Desmond and Moore contend that Darwinism was essentially an attempt to defend universal brotherhood and undermine the strongest argument in the hands of polygenism, namely the idea that God created man differently.[21] How did Darwin achieve this? First, Darwin's discoveries demolished the distinction between animals and humans. Men and women were nothing more than hyper-developed animals whose biological and intellectual features had the same origin as those of

[19] Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 48.
[20] Adrian Desmond, James Moore, *Darwin's Sacred Cause. Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), 27-110.
[21] Ibid., 111-141.

apes, although they belonged to a different branch of the developmental tree. As a consequence, God did not establish the superiority of humans over animals, nor did humans have any specific feature (a soul, for example) that separated them from beasts. Secondly, Darwin's theory struck a blow at the idea of God's teleology: the perfection of human and animal bodies was not the product of a superior intelligence, but simply the result of a random process of selection and transmutation. Darwin corrected Lamarck's theory by introducing the ideas of the survival and selection of the best species. To recall the example of the giraffe, whereas Lamarck argued that the animals had managed to stretch their necks, Darwin maintained that out of a group of animals whose different features had developed in a completely random way, only giraffes had survived because of their special ability to reach sources of food inaccessible to shorter animals.[22]

However, despite his monogenist and evolutionist theory, Darwin was not against the idea of a hierarchy of human groups. As historian Robert J. Richards stresses, Darwin "aligned the human groups on a developmental path, from 'savage' races to the 'civilized'." In actual fact, Darwin refrained from using the term "race", which he considered indistinguishable from that of species.[23] But the most important points to stress are, firstly, that Darwin circumscribed the level of development to *non*-biological fields: from a biological point of view, men were all equal. Differences may occur in the realm of political, cultural, social advancement, but not in the realm of biology. Secondly, even the different levels of development of human groups were modifiable through time. The classification was not cast in stone, but was flexible and modifiable.

Adolph Douai, like virtually all the other socialists writing about evolution in this period, did not contest the authority of Darwin's findings. In 1878, he opened an article on the *Chicagoer Vorbote* by arguing that "the great theory of Darwin brilliantly discovered that

[22] Bowler, *Evolution*, 151-186.
[23] Richards, *Tragic Sense of Life* 271.

in nature there were two ways in which the great wealth of different types of creatures comes off, descent and adaptation." However, already in the second sentence he was expounding an opinion Darwin would not readily agree with:

> Living creatures will remain similar to parents as long as no other effect of nature changes that similarity (…). External events in nature include food, housing, the air we breathe, the shape and colours of the objects around us, and all the sensory stimuli they produce, the surface morphology of the soil, the climate of the locality, the enemies and the friends among the other living creatures; we prefer to group all these effects under the common name of "soil", or soil and climate.[24]

Douai, while formally embracing Darwin's point of view, was in effect putting forward a distinct theory of geographic determinism that resembled an expanded version of Lamarckism. According to Douai, every single mutation in the geographic context caused a parallel change to the physical structure of human beings. As long as people remained in the same place, no modification intervened. But once, for whatever reasons, they moved, their bodies progressively adapted to the new environment. This created a vast variety of different living beings, out of which, according to a Darwinian process of selection, only the best survived. Douai was incredibly imaginative in describing the effects of geographic circumstances on human bodies. To give an example, he argued that people living in the Tropics had dark skin because the heat prevented their lungs from breathing out all the carbon dioxide in the blood. As a result, some dioxide ended up under the skin and darkened its colour. Douai provided a further detail to prove his theory, that "the negro children are

[24] Adolph Douai, "Abstammung und Anpassung beim Menschengeschlecht", *Chicagoer Vorbote*, December 7, 1878.

fairly white because they only begin to breathe at birth, and only later progressively darken."[25]

Even though he was an atheist, and therefore uninterested in defending the Bible, Douai was a supporter of monogenism. According to him, humankind was divided into three races (the white, the yellow and the black), but all three groups originated from the same species, as demonstrated by Charles Darwin. The problem is that Douai's concepts of "species" and "race" – which, unlike Darwin, he saw as separate categories – were vague to say the least. Douai stressed that human beings had far more similarities than differences, and for him this was enough to conclude that humans were all part of the same species. But the socialist intellectual did not elaborate further on the topic.[26] By contrast, the explanation for human diversity was a task that Douai took on with special enthusiasm. His methodology, once again, was revealing. Douai combined historical information, considerations about nutrition, the availability of food and domestic animals, geographic circumstances, technological developments, and linguistics. Therefore, even though he apparently based his theory of transmutation only on geography, in reality he formulated an analysis that was holistic in its methodology and scope. Douai placed African Americans, "negritos," Malaysians, native Americans, and "half-breeds of the white, yellow and white race" on the lowest scale of human development, whereas "in the temperate climates", he maintained, " we find both the largest variety of bodily and mental development and the only progressed culture."[27] As these few remarks show, Douai connected human development to the technological, cultural and social status of sophistication of the respective cultures and societies: tribes living in the Tropics, Malaysia or Africa were the least developed, whereas Europe and the US were at the top of the scale. In Douai's analysis the biological and cultural levels continuously

[25] Ibid.
[26] "Abstammung und Anpassung beim Menschengeschlecht", *Chicagoer Vorbote*, December 28, 1878.
[27] "Abstammung und Anpassung beim Menschengeschlecht", *Chicagoer Vorbote*, December 14, 1878.

intertwined. As a result, the "white race" not only had a higher level of technological development, but it was also "mentally and physically superior."[28]

Douai used the work of some German scholars he came across during his formative academic years as inspiration for his theories. Alexander von Humboldt, the founder of historic and human geography, was surely amongst them. Humboldt grew up reading Immanuel Kant's books and discussing his theories with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller and his brother Wilhelm von Humboldt, later a leading linguist and founder of the Humboldt University in Berlin.[29] His travels in South America between 1799 and 1804, and his published accounts of them, inaugurated a new method of studying the interaction between man and his geographical environment.[30]

Historian Laura Dassow Walls argues that Humboldt's scientific method was based on four commandments: explore, collect, measure and connect. The first step to investigate a place was to experience it, be intrigued and overwhelmed by its physical presence: the aesthetic and sensorial response to it was as important as any scientific datum. Secondly, the scientist was required to collect samples of plants, rocks, insects, fossils, etc. The third phase had the objective of measuring the physical features of the place: the blueness of the sky, transparency of the atmosphere, strength and depth of ocean currents, humidity and temperature of the air, and so on. Finally, the most important step was to collate all the information acquired. Humboldt believed that the set of disparate data the scientist gathered in his explorations could be brought together into a holistic view of nature. His main work, *Cosmos*, was a five-volume attempt to synthesise his grand theory of nature into a unified system, which went from emotional responses to natural landscapes to the explanation of theories connected to geographical phenomena. His work was a powerful expression of early

[28] "Abstammung und Anpassung beim Menschengeschlecht", *Chicagoer Vorbote*, December 28, 1878.
[29] Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: a Metabiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1-27; Walls, *Passage to Cosmos*, 12-48.
[30] Sandra Nichols, "Why was Humboldt forgotten in the United States?," *Geographical Review* 96, no. 3 (Jul., 2006), 399-415.

nineteenth century Romanticism. With its commingling of different disciplines, it became enormously influential not only for scientists like Charles Darwin, but also for artists like the Transcendentalists and the painters of the American Hudson River school.[31]

Humboldt died in 1859. In that period, Douai was a schoolteacher in Boston. His love for Humboldt was so renowned that the local German association asked him to organise an event of commemoration for the deceased Prussian naturalist.[32] It is not difficult to see how much Douai had relied on Humboldt's theories: the German American socialist was imitating the same all-embracing analytical style of his intellectual role model, using a broad-ranging multidisciplinary approach that tried to reconstruct the development of the different human races by putting together different elements in a logically consistent structure. Unfortunately, Douai was not an explorer, nor could he collect material or measure the geographical features of the places he analysed. What is more, he lacked Humboldt's scientific rigor and refined education. His final results, therefore, were much more modest. The differences between the two can be explored by investigating Humboldt's opinions on the idea of race. In *Cosmos*, the Prussian naturalist argued that mankind was distributed in varieties, "designed by the somewhat indefinite term *races.*" However, the differences between human groups were so many that to give a sharp, clear, *scientific* definition of the idea of race was essentially impossible. On the idea of creating a table of human races, Humboldt was crystal clear:

> While we maintain the unity of the human species, we at the same time repel the depressing assumption of superior and inferior races of men. There are nations

[31] Walls, *Passage to Cosmos*, 120-129; Nichols, "Why was Humboldt," 405.
[32] Justine Davis Randers-Pehrson, *Adolf Douai, 1819-1888: the Turbulent Life of a German Forty-Eighter in the Homeland and in the United States* (New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000), 257-258. During the commemoration, Douai entered in a dispute with a protégé of the renowned naturalist Louis Agassiz, who had celebrated Humboldt for his religious faith. Douai, a fierce atheist, slandered his intervention on the stage, and was later attacked by Agassiz himself. Cf. Randers-Pehrson, *Adolph Douai*, 259-260.

> more susceptible of cultivation, more highly civilized, more ennobled by mental cultivation than other, but none in themselves nobler than others.[33]

As this passage clearly demonstrates, Humboldt believed that while the humankind was divided into different groups with different attitudes, divisions based on inherent racial features simply did not exist. All men were "in like degree designed for freedom; a freedom which, in the ruder conditions of society, belongs only to the individual, but which, in social states enjoying political institutions, appertains as a right to the whole body of the community".[34]

In his articles, Douai reinterpreted Humboldt's egalitarian position. He adopted a holistic Humboldtian approach, but he believed that whereas the Prussian naturalist had limited himself to the analysis of the natural world, modern methodologies such as Darwinism now enabled modern scientists to expand Humboldt's enquiry to include human beings. The problem was that Douai got Darwin's theory wrong. The German socialist did not understand exactly how the process of random selection worked, and he conflated Darwinism with Lamarckism. As a result, he formulated a theory that was a curious mixture of Humboldtian methodology, Darwinism and Lamarckism, in which geographical, socio-economic, and cultural elements continually reshaped the physical structure of human beings.

Nonetheless, Douai came to political conclusions that were not far away from those of his intellectual mentors. Douai believed in the physical diversity of human races, but he was also a "progressive" Lamarckian and therefore he believed that the biological features of human races were in constant flux. Even the groups at the lower levels of the human scale of

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[33] Quoted in Walls, *Passage to Cosmos*, 175.

[34] Ibid. Humboldt's theory of human differences, with its emphasis on diversity and the impossibility of classifying human differences, was an antecedent of Franz Boas's cultural pluralism. Cf. Matti Bunzl, *Franz Boas and the Humboldtian Tradition: From Volksgeist and Nationalcharakter to the Anthropological Concept of Culture*, in *Volkszeit as Method and Ethic: Essays on Boasian Ethnography and the German Anthropological Tradition*, ed. George W. Jr. Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

development could improve for the better and rapidly achieve the top of the scale. Moreover, there were other elements of his theory that brought him to progressive political positions: for example, given the comprehensiveness of his theory, Douai paid special attention to the impact of social and economic conditions in the development of human groups, an element that increased the acuteness of his political commentaries. Finally, he was a staunch supporter of immigration, because he believed that the continuous intermingling of people improved the biological stock of the American population.[35]

## The inevitability of Darwinism: Paul Grottkau and August Otto-Walster

Douai was arguably the only socialist intellectual to use theories of race in such detail, but many others used Darwinism as an interpretative lens to discuss the contrasts between different racial and ethnic groups. For the generation that followed Douai's, born in pre-unification Germany in the 1830s and 1840s, it was no longer a question of giving a holistic explanation of the differences between human groups. They grew up in an intellectual milieu where the presence of a "theory of evolution", expressed in scientific terms, had ceased to be a novelty. The problem, on the contrary, was to understand to what extent the theory of evolution could be used to interpret human facts. The *Socialist* reported an opinion on Darwinism that perfectly contextualised the issue:

> It seems blind absurdity to attempt an explanation of human nature on the theory of evolution. The theory utterly fails to even hint at the facts with which we are confronted, when we begin to study the *moral* side of human life. The law of the survival of the fittest might have produced excellent *teeth* and *claws*, but it could

[35] Cf. infra, chap. 1; Adolph Douai, "The real number of foreign-born inhabitants of the U. St.", *San Antonio Zeitung*, November 25, 1854.

> never have evolved the *human heart* … This theory of man's origin is becoming popular on account of the materialistic tendency of modern thought, and is fast supplanting the old ideas derived from traditional superstition; but it must forever be rejected by those who discern the spiritual mysteries of human life.[36]

This article shed light on a historical development that in many ways went beyond the debate on race diversity that was being conducted in the socialist movement. The contrast between the "traditional superstition" and the "theory of evolution" mentioned by the correspondent was the challenge manifested by scientist paradigms developed after 1850 to centuries-standing religious philosophies.

Historian Alfred Kelly has given an in-depth analysis of how Darwin's theories were received in pre-unified Germany, where the German American socialists discussed in this chapter were educated in this period. In the nineteenth century, the German states were in the vanguard of academic research in biology and the natural sciences, pioneering the modern university system of education. Darwin's *Origin* was already translated in 1860 and his theories enjoyed a vast and immediate circulation. Kelly emphasises that this diffusion not only affected the academic elite but was also a genuine popular process, with many writers publishing widely circulating vulgarisations of Darwin's theories. According to Kelly, the success of Darwinism needs to be contextualised within wider political and intellectual trends. Germans welcomed Darwin's evolutionism because it attacked centuries-old ideologies defended by authoritarian institutions such as the Catholic Church. They saw it as an aspect of the human progress that would eventually overthrow illiberal institutions such as the Prussian autocracy and bring them political freedom. Darwin's theory was liberating because it rid the German intellectual world of the dualism between humans and animals (and in turn

[36] "Darwinism", *Socialist*, September 28, 1878. Emphasis in the original. The article was originally published in *The Index*.

between the spiritual and the physical) that had characterised German philosophy for the last two centuries. It was not by chance, contends Kelly, that by the end of the century many German socialists were strong advocates of Darwinism.[37]

The material published in the German-language socialist press in the US confirms what Alfred Kelly has suggested. German American socialists of the 1870s not only embraced Darwinism, but they saw it as fully compatible with the socialist doctrine and applicable to American contexts. In May 1878, the *Chicagoer Vorbote* published an article by Paul Grottkau titled "Darwinism in the economic and political world." Born in Berlin in 1846, Grottkau had been a member of the Lassallean *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiter-Verein* (General German Workers' Association) and editor of the *Berliner Freie Presse* and he was warmly welcomed by the German American socialist community of Chicago in the first months of 1878. His fame in Germany certainly facilitated his career in the local socialist movement, and just six months after his arrival he was nominated editor of the *Arbeiter Zeitung* and the *Chicagoer Vorbote*, the daily and weekly papers of the Chicago section of the SLP.[38]

In his article, Grottkau explained why Darwinism was so popular among employers and the ruling class:

> The bourgeoisie cheers Darwinism, because it thinks that with this hard, inhuman doctrine of naked and brutal struggle it can justify the legitimacy of the capitalist mode of production. Because, so these gentlemen say, each person fights for his

[37] Kelly, *The Descent of Darwin*, 3-35.
[38] Hartmut Keil, *German Immigrant Working-Class*, 165; John B. Jentz and Richard Schneirov, *Chicago in the Age of Capital. Class, Politics and Democracy During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 221-233.

existence, and only the better, the more appropriate survives, whereas those who go down have no right to exist.[39]

Grottkau did not try to contest the interpretation of Darwinism furnished by capitalists. In his opinion, the fact that the "struggle for existence" ruled political and economic relations was based in scientific evidence. Conversely, he showed the way in which Darwinism and socialism coexisted. Grottkau argued that in this phase of history, according to a Darwinian process, it was legitimate for big businesses to destroy and incorporate small businesses, so in the future it would be legitimate for the socialist Cooperative Commonwealth (the biggest form of economic production possible), to destroy and incorporate capitalist businesses.[40]

The Prussian socialist was not the only one to hold this position in the SLP. Similar opinions could be found in the writings of August Otto-Walster. Otto-Walster was born in Dresden in 1834. He had worked in the *Dresdner Volkszeitung* and had cooperated with August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht to found the Marxist *Sozialdemokratischen Arbeiterpartei* (Social-democratic Labour Party) in 1869. Otto-Walster arrived in New York in 1876, hired by the SLP to work as editor of the official paper *Arbeiter Stimme*. In 1878, he moved to St. Louis to become the editor of the *Volksstimme des Westens*, a step forward in his career, considering that St. Louis had one of the biggest sections in the party and the *Volksstimme* was one of the few socialist dailies in America.[41]

In October 1878 Otto-Walster commented on a talk given by Oscar Schmidt, an early supporter of Darwinism, in which the German academic rejected the idea that Darwin's theory and socialism were in some way compatible. The debate on the topic exploded in 1877

[39] Paul Grottkau, "Der Darwinismus in der ökonomischen und politischen Welt", *Chicagoer Vorbote*, May 11, 1878.
[40] Ibid.
[41] August Otto-Walster, *Leben und Werk: eine Auswahl mit unveröffentlichen Briefen an Karl Marx* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1966); Hartmut Keil, *A Profile of Editors of German-American Radical Press, 1850-1910*, in *The German-American Radical Press: the Shaping of a Left Political Culture*, eds. Elliot Shore, Ken Fones-Wolf, James P. Danky (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 21.

in Germany after Rudolf Virchow, a renowned physician, had argued that Darwinism should not be taught in schools because of its dangerous aspects, confirmed by the fact that even socialists embraced it. Virchow's intervention provoked a hostile reaction from Darwinian scientists. Zoologist Ernst Haeckel, by far the most celebrated and popular advocate of Darwinism in Germany, vehemently attacked Virchow, arguing that Darwinism scientifically proved the inequality of men and therefore was at odds with the egalitarian stance defended by socialism. The Virchow-Haeckel debate had a long echo in Germany, not only because of the fame of the actors involved, but also because it mixed scientific controversies with political implications, at a moment when socialism in Germany was far from popular.[42]

Otto-Walster was keenly aware of the German situation, and he took the occasion of Schmidt's talk to offer his take on the issue:

> Socialism does not state that all men have the same predispositions, but rather demands that in the struggle for existence the individual be granted the most complete use of all his inborn qualities, so as, for example, not to throw up as an unhappy winner an ignorant yet devoted millionaire like Vanderbilt ...[43]

The German socialist leader, like Grottkau, sought a way to make Darwinism and socialism coexist harmoniously. He argued that socialism did not contest the Darwinian principle that men were unequal and that the struggle for existence regulated social intercourse. However, it demanded fair and equal rules of engagement, so that everyone could have the chance to use their qualities and succeed in the struggle. Otto-Walster aimed to attack pro-bourgeois biases, but ultimately was at ease with a social model that implied structural inequality.

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[42] Kelly, 58-61; the reaction of Ernst Haeckel to Virchow's comments has subsequently become central to a debate that still divides scholars on the connections between Haeckel and Nazism. Cf. Gasman, *The Scientific Origins of National Socialism*; Hawkins, *Social Darwinism*; Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (New York; London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
[43] August Otto-Walster, "Darwinismus und Socialdemokratie", in *Volksstimme des Westens*, October 13, 1878.

The opinions of Adolph Douai on the one hand and of Paul Grottkau and August Otto-Walster on the other exemplify the way in which German American socialists approached differences of race in the 1870s and early 1880s. In this period the SLP became a site where scientific theories of evolutionism were regularly deployed to conceptualise and explain racial differences, but socialists did not produce a single and coherent position on the topic. Conversely, by investigating the intellectual debate in pre-unified Germany and considering generational differences within the German American socialist community, it has been possible to identify two general approaches to the issue, the first characterised by Douai's eclectic mix of Darwinism and pre-Darwinian geographical determinism, and the second epitomised by Grottkau's and Otto-Walster's attempts to amalgamate Darwinism and socialism. While not being anti-egalitarian or racist in themselves, these approaches conceded the possibility that structural inequality, based on biological, social and economic conditions, was a reality inscribed in the natural laws that governed human interaction. This concession severely weakened the emancipatory power of the political message socialist activists were trying to spread.

## Anti-Darwinist approaches: colour-blind internationalism

At first, Marx and Engels welcomed the publication of Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* with enthusiasm. In 1859, Engels wrote to his friend:

> Darwin, by the way, whom I'm reading just now, is absolutely splendid. There was one aspect of teleology that had yet to be demolished, and that has now been

> done. Never before has so grandiose an attempt been made to demonstrate historical evolution in Nature, and certainly never to such good effect.[44]

However, as the quotation aptly shows, the aspect of the theory that both Marx and Engels enjoyed most was its capacity to explain evolution without religion. Marx reconfirmed this idea two years later. In presenting Darwin's book to Ferdinand Lassalle, he wrote:

> Despite all imperfections [in Darwin's manner of developing his argument], here for the first time teleology in the natural sciences is not only dealt a mortal blow, but its rational sense is also empirically explained.[45]

Marx's and Engels's enthusiasm was an expression of the anti-spiritualism sentiment generated in Germany by the liberating theories of Darwin. The two socialist philosophers were looking for a confirmation of their materialism. Darwin's theory provided a powerful argument against Hegelian idealism, the model in contrast to which Marx and Engels had framed their theory. However, as stressed by historian Richard Weikart, the German philosophers did not incorporate any other aspects of Darwin's point of view into their theoretical plan. By the time Marx read Darwin's work, contends Weikart, the key tenets of his materialistic methodology were already in place. Marx's understanding of the world was based on the distinction between the human and animal worlds. His theory was entirely devoted to explaining the dynamics that regulated human interactions. Biology and natural sciences were peripheral areas in Marx's system of thought. Therefore, continues Weikart,

[44] Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, 11 December 1859. Quoted in Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism*, 22.
[45] Karl Marx to Ferdinand Lassalle, 16 January 1861. Quoted in Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism*, 23.

"Marx's evolutionary view of society did not in any way derive from or depend on biological evolution."[46]

It is not surprising, then, that those German American socialists who more closely followed Marx and Engels's theories were less proactive when it came to embracing Darwinist approaches. This is evident in the opinions expressed in the *Labor Standard*, the newspaper controlled by the SLP faction that supported trade unionism. This group was composed of former members of the North American section of the IWMA and recent immigrants to the US, mostly English-speaking and located in New England and New York. Amongst its more prominent leaders were Friedrich A. Sorge and Joseph P. McDonnell, the editor of the *Labor Standard* from 1876.

McDonnell was born in Dublin in 1847. During his youth, spent between Dublin and London, he had been a vocal advocate of Irish nationalism, a supporter of the Paris Commune and a member of the IWMA, serving as Irish secretary in the early 1870s. McDonnell had been jailed several times for his political activities and Herbert G. Gutman notes that on his arrival in New York in 1872 "few other immigrants carried to industrializing America so full and so complete a set of radical credentials."[47]

Leaders like McDonnell and Sorge brought to the SLP the internationalist inspiration that had animated the IWMA, as clearly explained in the *Labor Standard* in 1877:

> If capital does not care to import French Canadians, Italians, Poles and heathen Chinese by the ten thousand, to abate the wages of labor and increase its own profits, what more necessary thing have *we* to do than to organize ourselves with

[46] Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism*, 22. On Marx, Engels and their ideas on Darwin and evolutionism, cf also: Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought, 1870-1920* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 15-25.
[47] Herbert G. Gutman, *Joseph P. McDonnell and the Workers' Struggle in Paterson, New Jersey*, in Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 1987), 95-98.

> the laborers of all nations to keep the wolf from the door first, and to break down private capital next?[48]

In the newspaper the problem of national and racial differences was rarely analysed in itself. However, the issue was often mentioned in connection with the dynamics of the job market and immigration. But here, the interests of the American workers were never given first place. Labour internationalism was applied in a rigid and consistent way.

On July 7 1877, the *Labor Standard* published an article written by its correspondent "Middleton" (a pseudonym). McDonnell so warmly embraced the content of the piece that he decided to forgo his own weekly column in order to make space for Middleton's. Using simple language and an easy-to-follow logical progression, Middleton explained why American wages were decreasing so rapidly: as a consequence of global interconnection, high American wages had fallen to the level of low European wages. At this point, "having exhausted the civilized world in the hunt for cheap labor," capitalists had turned to China.[49] But Middleton did not indulge in any protectionist temptation, arguing: "it is useless to prevent the importation of the products of cheap labor, so long as we import the cheap labourer." Middleton adamantly concluded his case by declaring that "the best protection for labor at home, is the improvement of the *Laborer* abroad."[50] He refused to place any blame on the workers immigrating to the US:

> The French, German, English, Irish, Italian, or even Chinaman are not less fond of high wages than the American. No better evidence of this is needed, than the fact that they will leave their homes, their friends, and all the social conditions under which they have lived from childhood, and come to a country whose whole

[48] "The necessity of international organization", *Labor Standard*, January 18, 1877.
[49] Middleton, "The international labor congress and American representation", *Labor Standard*, July 7, 1877.
[50] Ibid.; emphasis in the original.

> manners and customs, and even the very language, are all entirely strange, if not repulsive, to them. All this they will do in order to obtain *high wages*. It is therefore clear that their object is to improve their own condition, rather than impair ours.[51]

Placing himself in the position of immigrants, Middleton demonstrated a profound sympathy for their circumstances, and put forward a political strategy that sought to satisfy both American and immigrant workers.

Trade unionists did not focus only on immigration and national differences, but also on racial inequality. An example of this is the speech that McDonnell gave to a crowd in New York during the Great Strike of 1877. On this occasion, the *Labor Standard* editor celebrated the interracial unity of workers by declaring that "it was a grand sight to see in West Virginia, white and colored men standing together, men of all nationalities on one supreme contest for the common rights of the workingmen. The barriers of ignorance and prejudice were fast falling before the growing intelligence of the masses. Hereafter there shall be no north, no south, no east, no west, only one land of labor and the workingmen must own and possess it."[52] Class solidarity, according to McDonnell, should make no exceptions. The worsening of the workers' situation opened new spaces to unite them despite their sensitivity to ethnic and racial differences.[53]

The contrast between scientific racialism and colour-blind internationalism described above allows us to recast the role of Sorge and his followers in the history of American trade unionism. The first chapter of this thesis documented how, during Reconstruction, IWMA leaders failed to forge interracial alliances by not understanding the reasons for African American support for the Republican Party. But the situation had changed by the end of the

[51] Ibid.; emphasis in the original.
[52] Quoted in Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), 119-123.
[53] The colour-blind internationalists' points of view on race will be further analysed in chapter four.

decade. In the context of the late 1870s and early 1880s, with its intellectual landscape made up of exclusivist nationalism, Darwinism and scientific racialism, the position of this group of internationalists once again represented one of the most progressive voices in the American radical movement. At a historical moment when the failure of Reconstruction and workers' competition on the job market favoured the spread of practices based on racial and ethnic discrimination, these socialists kept a global perspective and managed to shun the calls for protectionist and supremacist strategies. Their decision to leave aside political action and focus on trade unionism had two positive effects: first, it gave them the chance to work for small, piecemeal improvements, which could easily win the favour of workers; secondly, abandoning political elections meant not being forced to back political campaigns antithetical to socialist ideals (the closure of the Pacific borders, for example) solely for electoral reasons.

Unfortunately, however, the trajectory of the internationalists in the SLP was short-lived. The Sorgean group joined the WPUS-SLP in 1876 on the condition that the party would not take part in the elections until it was strong enough to achieve some solid result. This clause, approved with a last-minute agreement during the Foundation Congress, was violated just three months later by the Newark section of the party, led by the proponent of political action Peter J. McGuire. This opened a year-long debate, where the two opposing factions faced one another without any intention to surrender their respective positions. Paradoxically, the matter was settled to the advantage of political actionists by a series of trade union-led protests – the great strike of 1877. This caused a sudden increase in the socialist vote, especially in some cities like Cincinnati and Chicago, and allowed the supporters of the ballot box to overtake and exclude the defenders of trade unionism. Sorgeans formally remained in the SLP until the end of 1877 but they did not even take part

in the second Congress of the party in December 1877, and by 1878 had founded their own organisation, the International Labor Union (ILU).[54]

With the split from the Workingmen's Party, the Sorgean-Marxist strand of thought secured a firm place in the American radical world. The ILU enlisted among its members some old activists of the eight-hour movement, such as Ira Steward and George E. McNeill.[55] In the end, Sorge managed to achieve what he had been attempting since 1869: to fuse his Marxist trade-unionism with American workers' activism in the manner of the National Labor Union. However, over the ten years spent trying to accomplish this result, the situation of the American labour world had completely changed, and former NLU members no longer represented had prominent positions of leadership among American workers. According to Sorge himself, the ILU managed to organise some successful events in New England, but after a couple of years the organisation was dismantled. In his series of articles on the *Neue Zeit*, Sorge blamed the repressive anti-trade union regulations for the early failure of his organisation. Even if the meeting called by the ILU attracted large turnouts, he argued, the organisers could not find workers who agreed to be president or secretary of their assemblies, let alone enrol in the organisation, because having their names published in the *Labor Standard* would have guaranteed a swift dismissal from their job place. Despite decent results, then, the union was forced to close in 1880.[56]

The principles of the ILU did not disappear from the world of organised American labour. However, rather than being revived by Gompers's AFL, as Messer-Kruse has suggested in *The Yankee International*, they were upheld by the most successful trade union federation of the 1880s, the Knights of Labor. The promotion of piecemeal measures to improve the lot of workingmen and women without distinction of race and ethnicity returned

[54] *Labor Standard,* July 2, 16 and 23, 1877; *National Socialist*, May 11, 1878.
[55] Foner, *Workingmen's Party*, 105-113.
[56] Friedrich A. Sorge, *Friedrich A. Sorge's Labor Movement in the United States. A History of the American Working Class from Colonial Times to 1890*, eds. Brewster Chamberlin and Philip S. Foner (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 199.

as a key aspect of the action of the Knights in the 1880s. Not only that, but the Knights put into practice the intuition of Middleton. Animated by the conviction that organising workers *in loco* was the best strategy against cheap labour, they actually opened sections of the trade union federation in Europe and attempted to tackle the problem of immigration by improving the conditions of potential immigrants at home, similarly to what had been attempted by the IWMA in the 1860s. The ideals of ethnic and racial equality sketched by ILU members were translated into deeds by the Knights of Labor.[57] Sorge and his group indicated a possible alternative for socialists. When in the early 1880s the failure of the SLP convinced many socialists to abandon political action, many joined the Knights of Labor and continued their political activism in that organisation. The ILU opened a path that was later followed by many other socialists.

## Conclusions

Scientific racialism and Darwinism and colour-blind international trade unionism were the two main approaches used by the American socialist movement in the late 1870s and early 1880s to discuss and address racial diversity. By focusing on the large German American component of the SLP and investigating the specific features of the German American community in the US, it is possible to identify the intellectual origins of the different groups that animated the debate in the party. In this chapter I described three of them: the first, exemplified by the writings of Adolph Douai, used pre-Darwinian approaches, such as the holistic methodology of Alexander von Humboldt and the linguistic methods of Schlegel, and mixed them with Lamarckian and Darwinist elements. A second group, described through Paul Grottkau and August Otto-Walster, saw Darwinism as an eminently positive theory and

[57] On internationalism and the Knights of Labor, cf. Steven Parfitt, "Brotherhood from a Distance: Americanization and the Internationalism in the Knights of Labor," *International Review of Social History* 58, Issue 3 (Dec. 2013), 463-491.

sought ways to connect it with socialism. Finally, a third group, epitomised by Friedrich A. Sorge and Joseph P. McDonnell, rejected approaches based on scientific theories and relied upon race-blind internationalism to discuss national and racial differences.

These divisions intersected with political frictions within the party: the Sorge and McDonnell group overlapped with a faction that defended trade unionism as opposed to political action and the participation in political elections. This faction had a short life in the SLP, remaining in the organisation only between 1876 and 1878. Although they moved on to found a new movement (the International Labor Union), socialists supporting scientific racialist and Darwinist points of view took the lead within the party. However, it is important to stress that the dividing lines between the different groups marked out in this chapter were more blurred than might appear at first sight. Several elements contributed to this: firstly, those who used race-based approaches were not necessarily racist or white supremacist, as suggested in the second section of this chapter, and as will become clearer in the next chapters of this work. Secondly, a minority of colour-blind trade unionists were present in the big SLP section of Chicago, and remained in the party after 1878. However, while race-blind and internationalist positions continued to be represented within the SLP, the point remains that from 1877 onwards the SLP was a party where socialists embracing scientific racialist and Darwinist points of view were at ease to express their opinions, as the next chapter will detail with specific regards to the "Chinese Question."

# MUST THEY GO?
# THE SLP AND THE "CHINESE QUESTION," 1876-1890

On March 16th 1878, "Helverson," a regular correspondent for the *Socialist*, wrote an article on the so-called "Chinese Question," the set of problems created by the arrival of an allegedly excessive number of Chinese immigrants in California. The journalist outlined his position by quoting approvingly some passages from the final report published by the Chinese Immigration Commission, a US Congress-initiated investigation conducted in 1876 to gather information about "the grand question between Asiatic cheap labor and American labor."[1] The document stated that "Chinese immigration involves sordid wages, no public schools, and the absence of the family" and the "problem" of excessive Chinese immigration "MUST BE SOLVED; it cannot be treated with indifference." Helverson argued that if the employers and the government were willing to solve the issue of Chinese immigration then an easy solution was at hand, namely to increase wages. This simple change would, in Helverson's view, accomplish two goals with one move: not only would it mean that, "the pigtails and rat-eaters will return to their own celestial land for nobody will want their services," but at the same time the white workers ("Caucasians from the Eastern States") would have more employment opportunities and be able to increase their standard of living.[2]

[1] Helverson, "The Chinese Question," *Socialist*, March 16, 1878. The US Congress Commission was made up of three Senators (Morton, Sargent and Cooper) and three Representatives (Piper, Meade and Wilson). They spent one month in California interviewing several witnesses, including employers, workers, and others involved in economic relations with Chinese workers and businessmen. Cf. Elmer Clarence Sandmeyer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1939), 80-85.
[2] Ibid.; emphasis in the original.

Less than two months later, the same newspaper published a letter from B. E. G. Jewett, a militant from Evansville, Indiana. Jewett started by "*suggesting* that your truly worthy and able paper cease to combat the Chinamen as a *class*," adding, in what appeared to be a reply to Helverson:

> The Chinaman coming here of his own accord and at his own expense of accumulated earnings, has as much right here as you or I or any German, Russ, Switzer, Frank, Turk, Pole, Irish or Ethiopian in the land; and true Socialism demands that as air, land, and water are eternally free to the whole race who wish to live, they shall not be debarred that privilege.[3]

Not only were attacks against Chinese immigrants unjust, continued Jewett, but they were also completely misguided. "What we want to fight" he added, "is not the *Chinese* … but we want to fight *the importers*." He concluded that socialists and labour organisers should "not say: 'the Chinese must go,' but that 'the oppressors money-mongers, Sharons *et al.* must go'."[4]

The history of Chinese migration to America contradicts the rhetoric of the United States as a nation of immigrants. The opinions offered above were expressed just a few years before the approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the federal law that closed the borders to immigrants coming from China. This statute, which was passed with a bipartisan agreement between the Republican and the Democratic Parties, was the first example of a restrictive norm based on racial grounds.[5] Historians have pointed to the white American and immigrant working class as the main culprits in the exclusion of Chinese workers. Evidence

[3] B. E. G. Jewett, "The Chinese Question," *Socialist*, May 4, 1878. Emphasis in the original.
[4] Ibid. Emphasis in the original.
[5] Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill, NC; London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3-16.

for this is not hard to find. Even without considering the exceptional case of the openly racist Workingmen's Party of California, not one single American labour organisation (not even the multiracial and anti-sexist Knights of Labor) defended the cause of Chinese workers. In *The Labor Question in America* (2011), historian Rosanne Currarino has persuasively argued that whites understood Chinese workers as what they *did not want to be*, shaping their own identity in opposition to theirs.[6]

The only historian who in recent years has cast some doubt on the presumed racism of the vast majority of the white American working class is Andrew Gyory. In *Closing the Gate* (1998), Gyory suggests that the vast majority of white workers, located on the East Coast, rejected the racism and Sinophobia of their California colleagues. They further rejected the rhetoric of national labour leaders, who used Chinese immigrants as scapegoats for larger political problems. In actual fact, Gyory maintains that white workers were opposed to the importation of *coolies*, the name given specifically to the indentured and enslaved workforce that came from China under illegal forms of contract, rather than the immigration of free Chinese workers. The anti-Chinese sentiments which informed the Chinese Exclusion Act, Gyory concludes, were fostered and exploited by American political elites for purely electoral reasons, playing on widespread racial antipathies.[7]

Gyory's distinction between the importation of coolies and the immigration of free workers helpfully illuminates the position that colour-blind internationalists like J.E.B. Jewett brought to the SLP. These socialists argued that, whereas the importation of coolie workers should be banned, free Chinese immigrants had the right to settle in the country. However,

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[6] Selig Perlman, "Upheaval and Reorganisation (from 1877)," in John Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, (New York: MacMillan Company, 1935-1936), 2:252-268; Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: a History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990); Stanford M. Lyman, "The 'Chinese Question' and American Labor Historians," *New Politics* 7, no. 28 (Winter 2000), 113-148; Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011). On the Knights of Labor and Chinese immigrants, cf. Rob Weir, "Blind in One Eye Only: Western and Eastern Knights of Labor View the Chinese Question," *Labor History* 41 (2000), 421-436.

[7] Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 1-3.

this stance, and Gyory's argument as a whole, is problematic, because it assumes that the distinction between importation and immigration was clearly understood by contemporaries. In fact, the mingling of racial and labour identities allowed many to insist that *all* Chinese workers were, by definition, "coolies." The controversial point was the status, practice, and extent of the phenomenon of importing Chinese workers. What precisely was a "coolie" worker? How many Chinese immigrants were actually "enslaved" workers, as the white working class disparagingly claimed? What was the role of Chinese institutions such as the Six Companies, the large-scale organisations that coordinated workers' immigration and settlement in the US and were universally criticised as responsible for the enslavement of Chinese workers? Furthermore, to what extent did socialists engage with these questions?[8]

The answers to these questions were what made the difference between a progressive and a reactionary position on the "Chinese Question." Recent historiography has complicated our understanding of the issue of coolie labour as a factor in Chinese immigration. These works have demonstrated that Chinese immigration in the US developed in a peculiar way, involving trans-Pacific businesses based on contract-working for American companies, credit-systems to pay for the trip and support in the US, and the maintenance of regional and clan-based social structures in American Chinatowns. Class and social tensions permeated Chinese immigrant society in the US, and Chinese workers were far from being the "docile" and "enslaved" people Western sources described them as in the nineteenth century.[9]

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[8] This critique of Gyory's argument is developed comprehensively by Stanford M. Lyman. Cf. Lyman, "The 'Chinese Question' and American Labor Historians."

[9] A selection of recent literature on Chinese Americans includes: Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*; Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *China and the Overseas Chinese in the United States, 1868-1911* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1983); Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Bensong Tong, *The Chinese Americans* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000); Birgit Zinzius, *Chinese America: Stereotype and Reality: History, Present, and Future of the Chinese Americans* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); Peter Kwong and Dušanka Dušana Miščevič, *Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community* (New York; London: The New Press, 2005); Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: the Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Yucheng Qin, *The*

The way in which socialists understood and interpreted Chinese labour immigration is the key factor in assessing their responses to the "Chinese question." Socialists' positions on the "Chinese Question" evolved in parallel with the history of the SLP. Initially, colour-blind internationalists decided the official position of the party, and in 1877 a resolution based on the distinction between importation of labour and immigration was passed. But this plank was dropped at the 1879 Convention and was not replaced by any new official position. Analysis of the party press suggests that at this point the majority of the SLP rank and file was against Chinese immigration. Many socialists (both in the English-language and in the German-language press) used pseudo-scientific arguments to conflate the image of the Chinese immigrant with that of the coolie and indentured worker, and concluded that China as a whole was an "enslaved" country whose inhabitants ought to be kept away from the free US. By 1882 a small group of socialists was still campaigning for the free immigration of Chinese, but the rest of the SLP was committed to an anti-Chinese immigration position. In the aftermath of the Exclusion Act, the anti-Chinese position became more entrenched and consistently held within the SLP. By the end of the 1880s not a single article in the socialist press defended the rights of those Chinese immigrants who remained in the US.[10]

In the debate between the colour-blind internationalist Jewett and the scientific racialist Helverson it was the latter whose views were ascendant within American socialist thought. The peculiar features of the "Chinese Question" shaped the discussion in specific ways. Internationalists tried to adapt their ideas to the political context, by adopting the distinction between importation and immigration, but their attempt was defeated by the combined effects

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*Diplomacy of Nationalism: The Six Companies and China's Policy Toward Exclusion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

[10] For an early and path-breaking analysis on the image of Chinese immigrants in the US, cf., Stuart Creighton Miller, *The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969) Critical discussion of the word "coolie" can found in Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).

of two factors: the strength of decades-old and widespread racist prejudices against "Orientals" and "Mongolians," and the strong anti-Chinese sentiments of the American and immigrant white working class, afraid of competition from Chinese immigrants in the workplace. Scientific racialists scored an easy victory on the "Chinese Question," but colour-blind internationalists set a progressive precedent that would be revived in the thought of 1890s Marxist socialists.

## Socialists facing the "Chinese Question": The SLP and the distinction between immigration and importation

In September 1878 the famous abolitionist intellectual Wendell Phillips sent a letter to the citizens of San Francisco. The topic was "Kearneyism", a reference to the philosophy of Dennis Kearney, the most important leader of the Workingmen's Party of California and inventor of the organisation's slogan "The Chinese must go!" An Irish immigrant who had arrived in the United States in 1868, Kearney had managed to gather together all the energies of various anti-coolie clubs that had spread across California into a single organisation, which ran at the elections of 1878 with extraordinary success.[11] In the letter, Phillips took a clear stand against anti-Chinese discrimination, using firm and uncompromising language. "Indeed," he argued, "I detest the shallow, heartless, and narrow views taken there [on the Pacific coast] on the subject [Chinese immigration]". The Chinese, like "all the millions from any race that will or can come here," were "sorely needed to fill up the vast wastes in our possessions between Omaha and the Pacific… The Chinese are a painstaking, industrious, and marvellously capable people. Statesmanship and political economy, as well as Christianity, bid us welcome such help in subduing the continent – not violently to trust them out." The letter concluded with a direct attack on Kearney himself, an Irish immigrant, who

[11] Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 113-137.

had arrived in America no more than thirty or forty years ago, and now wanted to close the door to Chinese: "Shame on the Irishman who, after his country's four centuries of protest and rebellion, borrows from England the self-same infamous and hateful weapons, to use them against Chinese!"[12]

Kearney was simply exploiting racist tendencies that had started to spring up in California decades earlier. For a very short period after the start of the Gold Rush, California's authorities and population had welcomed the arrival of immigrants from China. Californians not only thought that Chinese immigrants could open new commercial routes towards the West; they also saw them as industrious and law-abiding people. However, public perceptions changed quickly. When the initial boom of 1848-49 came to an end and left many without employment, Californian public authorities started to approve Chinese-targeted legal impositions such as the "foreign miners' license tax" (which imposed a payment of three dollars on every foreign miner who did not wish to become a citizen), special fees on boats carrying Chinese immigrants, or discriminatory statutes such as the one that required each Chinese person to provide proof of his or her "good character". From 1860 onwards white workers (Americans and immigrants alike) started to organise themselves into anti-coolie clubs. Founded in the 1860s, a decade of economic expansion, the clubs exploded in numbers amid the worsening economic crisis of 1873-77.[13]

The rise of Kearney's Workingmen's Party of California (WPC) can be attributed to this context, made up of economic exasperation and rising racial tensions. Kearney, a ruthless and smart populist, turned the underlying and at times implicit racial tensions rooted in decades of under-regulated and chaotic economic expansion and the results of the national economic recession into a Manichean racial war, in which the abolition of Chinese

[12] "Wendell Phillips on Kearneyism," *Socialist*, December 21, 1878.
[13] Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 82; Mark Kanazawa, "Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California", *The Journal of Economic History* 65, no. 3 (Sept., 2005), 779-805; Tong, *Chinese Americans*, 46.

immigration was presented as a panacea for all evils. Historians like Alexander Saxton have made clear that, even if Kearney framed his fight as a labour issue, he was not interested in any of the traditional struggles of the American labour movement of the time, such as the eight-hour working day or increased salaries. Kearney's political project was based on a single-issue campaign against Chinese immigration. Wendell Phillips's letter, ultimately, was an attempt to expose the overt racist implications of Kearney's rhetoric.[14]

At the very beginning of the 1876-1882 period, the Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS) held a curiously central position. The exceptional trajectory of Kearney's organisation, which peaked with the election of Isaac Kalloch as Mayor of San Francisco in 1878 and the assignation of a third of the delegates at the California constitutional Convention in the same year, started with a factional conflict within the tiny San Francisco sections of the socialist WPUS. Indeed, Kearney's first plan was to take control of the local branch of the WPUS and from there organise his anti-Chinese campaign. When he was denied membership (on account of his contempt for workers' issues), in late 1877 he moved on to form his own organisation, whose name – Workingmen's Party of California – closely echoed that of the socialist party.[15] This episode makes evident the importance of the issues at stake. The sudden success of Kearney's party (with only one year between the foundation of his organisation and the election of one of its members to Mayor of San Francisco) proves how solidly widespread anti-Chinese sentiments were amongst white Californian workers.

The pressure of events in California forced the WPUS to take a clear stand on Chinese immigration. At the party's first National Convention, held in Newark in December 1877, the organisation passed a resolution to the effect that "the importation of Coolies under contract must be immediately prohibited, and the Coolies already in America released from similar

[14] Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 72-75.
[15] On Kerney and the SLP, cf. "California," *Labor Standard*, July 29, 1878; "Address to the Party", *National Socialist*, September 7, 1878; the event is also commented on in Perlman, "Upheaval and Reorganisation (from 1877)," 2:254, but the date of the *National Socialist* article mentioned there is incorrect.

obligations."[16] Unfortunately, the Committee that edited the proceedings of the Convention did not record anything about the approval of the resolution, and consequently we have no way of knowing how the debate unfolded, and who supported it. However, by analysing the party press in the years that preceded the Convention it is possible to understand which groups within the party supported the plank. Amongst those in favour was definitely the group of colour-blind internationalists that at the time of the Convention gathered around the *Labor Standard*. Socialists writing in this newspaper focused on the distinction between importation and immigration that was clearly acknowledged in the resolution, and rejected discourses based on race distinctions. In June 1876, the *Labor Standard* published an unsigned piece which stated that socialists "do not object to the Chinaman as a Chinaman, but we object to him as a coolie, the same as we would object to a French, English, or German, if he comes to this country under the same economic conditions. We object to the system, and not to the man; as we objected to slavery, and not to the negro."[17] Adolph Douai, the German American leader of the party, also embraced this line of interpretation. He was amongst the representatives of workers' organisations convened in Washington by a Congress commission set up in 1878 to investigate the causes of the economic depression in the country. Abram Hewitt, Democratic member of the House of Representatives from New York, chaired the commission. Asked by a Congressman if he favoured the restriction of Chinese immigration, Douai answered that "we would not restrict anyone… We demand that Chinese emigration under contract ought to be stopped immediately." "Not otherwise?", urged the congressman. "Not otherwise," replied Douai.[18]

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[16] Socialistic Labor Party, *Platform, Constitution, and Resolutions, Adopted at the National Congress of the Workingmen's Party of the United States, Held at Newark (N.J.), December 26. 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 1877* (Cincinnati: Ohio Volks-Zeitung Print, 1878).

[17] "Don't Kill the Coolie!," *Socialist*, June 3, 1876. The article was published on the newspaper of the Social Democratic Party of North America, which was founded in April 1876 as *Socialist* and changed its name to *Labor Standard* in July of the same year. Cf. Perlman, "Upheaval and Reorganisation (from 1877)," 2:270-271.

[18] Quoted in Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate*, 131.

The distinction between importation and immigration, with its emphasis on the ways in which Chinese workers were hired, was a way to move the debate away from distinctions based on race. Socialists made clear that their opposition was not on racial or cultural grounds, but mostly on considerations of class. The 1876 article on the *Labor Standard* further elaborated on this, mentioning religious differences. "We do not object to the Chinese on account of their being 'heathen' and calling their god by a different name than ourselves, for we hold that while any man strictly follows the dictates of his own conscience, he is entitled to the respect of all good men."[19] By using their internationalist framework, based on the search for universal economic equality, socialists articulated a modern model of integration, based on the idea that people with cultural and social differences could coexist harmoniously as long as they were granted the economic means to survive. Another article in the *Labor Standard* argued:

> The cry that the "Chinese must go" is both narrow and unjust. It represents no broad *or* universal principle. (…) We have certainly a right to protest, and use every available means against the capitalistic combinations through which thousands of poor and ill-fed beings are imported to this country from China, Italy, and elsewhere, but we have no right to raise a cry against any class of human beings because of their nationality.[20]

Socialists used the nineteenth-century terminology of "nationality," but what they meant was that no distinction based on ethnic or racial belonging should be used to decide whether

[19] "Don't Kill the Coolie!," *Socialist*, June 3, 1876.
[20] "The Chinese Must Go!", *Labor Standard*, June 30, 1878. This article also appeared in *Socialist*, January 11, 1879.

someone was entitled to certain basic rights, which included the right to travel to the US in search of better working conditions.[21]

## Understanding Chinese immigrants. "Coolie workers" and the application of scientific racialism

The fact that the 1877 Convention approved a resolution based on colour-blind and internationalist principles proved that, despite the absence of Friedrich A. Sorge and his group and the progressive detachment of the *Labor Standard* from the party, by the end of 1877 there were still some members in the SLP who prioritised working-class solidarity beyond nationalities. The plank, at least at first sight, achieved two things: firstly, by focusing on the abolition of the coolie trade as opposed to the exclusion of Chinese immigrants, it situated the party in a position that safeguarded the cornerstone of labour internationalism, defended the interest of local and foreign workers, and contrasted with the racist and Sinophobe positions of anti-coolie clubs. Secondly, it consolidated the SLP in a position that both factions within the organisation (the trade unionist and the political actionist) had no difficulty in defending.

Yet the resolution did not settle the debate in the party. The San Francisco section of the SLP did not take part in the 1877 Convention; however, two months later it sent an official letter of protest to the party leadership, which was published in the *Arbeiter Stimme* in March 1878. San Francisco socialists thought that, even though the resolution recognised that there was a problem with coolie workers, it did not go far enough in discouraging Chinese immigration. They proposed to change the second part of the resolution from "and the

[21] On the overlaps between the concepts of race and nationality in this period, see James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween People: Race, Nationality and the "New Immigrant" Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1997), 3-44.

Coolies already in America released from similar obligations" to "and the Coolies already in America returned to their home."[22]

The theoretical stance implicit in the point of view defended by Californian socialists was crystal clear: all Chinese immigrants in the US were indentured workers, and therefore their presence in the country had to be prohibited. Compared to widespread views of Chinese immigration during the period, this was by no means an isolated stance. In fact, the vast majority of those socialists who wanted to limit or stop Chinese immigration invariably started from the premise that Chinese immigrants were "coolies." The socialist press of the time furnishes many other examples of this approach. An article pointedly titled "Chattel slavery revived," published in the *Labor Standard* in 1876, boldly declared that "it is safe to argue that ninety per cent of the Chinamen landed in San Francisco are slaves, and that all women, with very few exceptions, are here in a state of servitude."[23] In 1880, a piece in the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* went even further; it made the point that:

> Slavery in China is a four-thousand-year-old institution, which lives on as a dogma in the slaves themselves and is voluntarily observed by them with a religious sense; the coolies come with their enslavers, the Six Companies, to our soil, and they bring Chinese slavery with them, establish here a life according to Chinese laws, and continue to pay obedience to the Chinese emperor; they act in contradiction to our institutions, violating our people's sovereignty, and want to oblige us to let them continue with their foreign culture in our midst.[24]

In articles like this, socialists created a direct link between the national origin of Chinese immigrants and their "natural disposal" to be enslaved workers. Socialists aimed their

[22] "Protest der deutschsprechenden Sektion San Francisco," *Arbeiter Stimme*, March 24, 1878.
[23] "Chattel slavery revived," *Socialist*, June 24, 1876.
[24] "Ein Jurist bertheilt den Sozialismus", *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, April 3, 1880.

critique in particular at organisations like the Six Companies, Chinese societies in San Francisco that were accused of recruiting Chinese immigrants, enslaving them and bringing them to the US against their will to serve the interests of American businesses.

Socialist ideas on Chinese immigration, then, were tightly connected with debates on the status of Chinese immigrants in the country. Recent studies on Chinese immigration in the US in the late nineteenth century has challenged the assumption that Chinese immigrants really were "coolie" workers, as socialists now claimed. But were socialists completely out of touch from the reality of Chinese workers in California? Were their opinions shaped only by racial prejudice? Several aspects must be considered. First, socialist perspectives on coolie labour around 1880 must be viewed in light of the fact that the US Congress had banned the importation of indentured workers in 1862, in response to anxieties over the "coolie trade". By the end of 1850s, US officials in China had started to investigate the trade in Chinese workers, and had condemned it vehemently. They sent horrified reports about the brutal practices used by American and European merchants to kidnap workers from the coasts of China to bring them in chains to the British West Indies. On these bases, in 1862 Congress passed an Act that prohibited "the 'Coolie Trade' by American citizens in American vessels."[25] Historian Moon Hu-Jung gives a detailed account of how after emancipation Southern planters made failed attempts to circumvent the ban and replace freed slaves with Chinese indentured workers. Even worse, in the climate of Reconstruction these moves looked like veiled strategies to restore slavery, so Southern merchants found themselves in the position of justifying their acts and stressing the differences between the coolie system in the British West Indies and what they had in mind for the US South. The situation did not change after the approval of the Burlingame Treaty in 1869, which regulated relations

[25] "Anti-coolie Law," Sess. II, Chap. 27; 12 Stat. 340. 37th Congress, February 19, 1862, accessed February 18, 2016, http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/12%20stat%20340.pdf.

between the US and China until 1882 and reiterated the idea that only free workers could immigrate to the United States.[26]

There were two interlocked elements that, despite all the evidence of the contrary, nurtured socialist convictions that Chinese workers belonged to an indentured and enslaved workforce. The first was a set of negative stereotypes regularly associated with Chinese culture and people that had been widespread in the country since the early decades of the nineteenth century. As reconstructed by Stuart Creighton Miller, from the 1810s onwards missionaries, traders, and diplomats spread the image of Chinese inhabitants as naturally slavish, immoral and uncivilised.[27] Secondly, these racist stereotypes were reinforced by the peculiar ways in which Chinese immigration to the US was organised in the second half of the century. Attracted by the possibility of future earnings, Chinese workers agreed to pay exorbitant prices for the trip to the US which they then had to repay for years. Chinese companies gradually extended the profitability of labour exportation by moving on from organising the journey alone to additionally providing Chinese workers with lodging, work and meeting all their primary needs, in exchange for a percentage of the wage received. Class divisions within Chinese society also played a role in the way in which immigration in the US was organised. Entrepreneurs exploited the loosening of Chinese governmental controls on trade that followed the crisis of the Qing government. Moreover, the approval of the Burlingame Treaty in 1869 in the US, which established that Chinese immigrants could not apply for citizenship, imposed second-class legal status on them and contributed to a widening of the gap between their conditions and those of European immigrants who could attempt to integrate down the generations.[28]

[26] Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 20-25, 110. Cf. also Takaki *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 34-35; Kwong and Miščevič, *Chinese America*, 35-38.
[27] Miller, *Unwelcome Immigrant.*
[28] Kwong and Miščevič, *Chinese America*, 39-90; Zinzius, *Chinese America*, 11-18.

Organisations such as the Six Companies operated within the space created by this ambiguous legal condition of Chinese immigrants. Historian Yucheng Qin argues that the Six Companies were born as *huiguan*. In China, the *huiguan* were guilds organised on a regional, class and clan basis. For instance, if a person moved from the Guangdong province to another area of the Empire, he could rely upon the local Guangdong *huiguan* for support. In the US, the Six Companies reproduced similar patterns of regional and class solidarity. On the one hand, the Six Companies used patterns of ethnic solidarity to put themselves in a peculiar position of public authority towards Chinese immigrants: they helped to find work and lodging and run some public services in the various Chinatowns. At times, they functioned as a sort of Chinese embassy in the country, lobbying in Congress against laws targeted at Chinese and taking a public stance with official documents against anti-coolie clubs and organisations. For example, when in 1876 the Democratic mayor of San Francisco Andrew Jackson Bryant drew up a list of grievances against Chinese immigrants to be sent to Washington DC, the Six Companies wrote a "Memorial to President Grant" in which they replied to the charges of the Democratic politician point by point. The letter addressed many of the accusations levelled against Chinese immigrants at the time, but it also stressed the efforts undertaken by the Chinese association to solve the chronic problems of the Chinese American community (such the uncontrolled flux of immigrants from China and prostitution in San Francisco's Chinatown).[29] On the other hand, as stressed by Kwong and Miščevič, membership was not voluntary and the companies mainly represented the business interests of the entrepreneurs that ran them. The Six Companies created a strict system according to which no Chinese immigrant was able to flee the US without a certificate issued by his

[29] *Chinese American Voices: from the Gold Rush to the Present,* eds. Judy Yung, Gordon H. Chang and Him Mark Lai, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 17-25.

association which attested that all debts and dues had been paid. The *huiguan* did not hesitate to use violence against those who did not comply with their rules.[30]

Many Chinese workers in the US found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place, with Chinese businessmen on the one hand and California's racist society on the other. This was not the state that all Chinese immigrants who arrived in the US found themselves in, as many managed to pay their debts and remained in the country as independent immigrants, and many worked outside cities, in the countryside or in smaller towns along the west coast. However, it is undeniable that the experience of many Chinese workers in the country was marred by exploitation and discrimination, caused by dynamics internal to the Chinese immigrant community and Californian white society alike.

Socialists formulated their opinions on the "Chinese Question" within this complicated socio-political scenario. Those SLP members who were demanding an end to Asian immigration on the basis of their belief that Chinese immigrants were coolie workers had solid arguments on which to ground their opinions. Chinese immigrants were subject to certain dynamics of social and class exploitation that were specific to their immigrant community, and that in many ways resembled those of indentured workers. Still, this did not mean that socialists had a full and balanced understanding of the situation. While SLP members used their class-focused approach to denounce real episodes of class exploitation perpetrated within the Chinese immigrant community, they had an inadequate perception of the actual backgrounds, motivations and experience of Chinese workers in the country, and this lack of nuance came to be combined with underlying racial prejudice against the constructed category of "coolie" to shift the SLP's position against Chinese immigration. The following pages discuss several examples that detail this intermingling of approaches, in which socialists sinuously moved between labour internationalism and scientific racialism.

[30] Qin, *The Diplomacy of Nationalism*, 1-12; McClain, *In Search of Equality*; Pfaelzer, *Driven Out*, 198-252; Kwong and Miščevič, *Chinese America*, 82-89.

These articles cannot be placed into neat categories. They express sophisticated and complex views on the issue of Chinese immigration that need to be analysed independently.

An SLP militant from Matawan, N.J., who signed himself as "Rusticus," offered one of the most extensive treatments of the "Chinese question" in the socialist press of the period. Through a series of four letters sent to the *Socialist* between January and February 1879, Rusticus provided an in-depth analysis of Chinese workers' conditions and perspectives in the country, and suggested what action the party should take. Rusticus's remarks were meant as a reply to Wendell Phillips's address to the San Francisco population discussed earlier, but his analysis went well beyond it. Rusticus rejected Phillips's humanitarianism by describing how Chinese immigrant society operated in the US. The socialist militant relied upon first-hand experience based on his own lengthy spells on the West Coast. Rusticus's main polemical target initially appeared to be the Six Companies. The socialist showed an acute awareness of class warfare within the Chinese immigrant community. He declared that "the greater number of them [Chinese immigrants] are slaves, in the fullest sense of the word," even if inexperienced persons like Phillips could not distinguish "the slave from the master who imports him, for both are the yellow-skinned Chinamen. But the people who have had more opportunity to observe them … know the difference already by sight—by the cut and make-up of their clothes."[31] Class exploitation trapped Chinese workers in a position of economic dependence. For this reason, Rusticus advised that "the people of California who are at present engaged in the anti-Chinese movement enter a civil suit against the Six Chinese Companies for violating and circumventing the Constitution and laws of the country, by importing and exacting servile and compulsory labor."[32]

However, even though Rusticus denounced the exploitation of Chinese workers, he did not campaign for their freedom to work in the US. On the contrary, he argued that it was "to

[31] Rusticus, "More of the Chinese Question," *Socialist*, January 18, 1879.
[32] Rusticus, "The Chinese Problem," *Socialist*, February 1, 1879.

the credit of [Kearney's] movement that the immigration of the Chinese has decreased so much during the last two years." [33] Elsewhere, he blamed Chinese people for their unwillingness to integrate into American society. Replying to Phillips's accusations about Irish immigrants, he declared:

> Have you heard of one Chinese helping to fight the war of Rebellion, although Chinese immigrated here twelve years before? … The Chinese have now been coming for thirty years. Can you tell me how many Chinese American citizens – children born of Chinese parents and brought up in our country and in our schools – are registered in proportion to the number of Chinese immigrants from 1849 to 1879? And how does that number of Chinese Americans compare with the number of Irish Americans?[34]

On another occasion, he argued that it was the Chinese American community itself, controlled by the Six Companies, that willingly created and perpetrated the racial barriers that divided Chinese and American workers: if a free Chinese immigrant was "no longer satisfied to work for wages; if he accepts something of the American spirit of enterprise and starts out in business for himself, and if his business should come into competition with an establishment of the Six Companies then he is ostracised from the Chinese population altogether." He went on to describe in detail how Chinese immigrants were hired and kept in an enslaved and degraded condition by having their wages distributed by Chinese "bosses," the only ones who could speak some English.[35]

Rusticus's argument contained several of the contradictions circulating within socialist thinking on the "Chinese question." While he recognised that Chinese workers were victims

[33] Ibid.
[34] Rusticus, "The Chinese Problem," *Socialist*, January 11, 1879.
[35] Rusticus, "More of the Chinese Question," *Socialist*, January 18, 1879.

of exploitation and oppression from their own Chinese masters, he did not campaign for the emancipation of Chinese workers, or propose to organise them into trade unions and free them from the oppression of their Chinese masters. On the contrary, Rusticus concluded that the practices of exploitation on which the local Chinese American community was founded showed the deeply corrupted nature of Chinese culture as a whole, ultimately expounding a position that resembled that of San Francisco socialists. Rusticus denounced the unwillingness of Chinese immigrants to integrate into American society, but it is debatable whether he considered integration a feasible option at all. His analysis contested the SLP's official distinction between importation and immigration, by suggesting that integration between Chinese and white people was impossible.

In many other cases, socialist articles expressed concepts close to Rusticus's but with a more explicit use of scientific racialist theories. *Gelbe Sklaverei* ("yellow slavery" in German) was the expression used by the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* to discuss the "Chinese "Question." The *Volkszeitung* was a beacon for German American socialist and labour activists in the country and reflected the approach of the members of the publishing company who produced it: a group of political exiles with a strong background in socialist theory, often former members of the German SPD, who maintained ties with Friedrich Engels and the German socialist leaders.[36] This group was in touch with the SLP leadership, but remained independent from the party. Throughout its history, there were moments in which the two organisations worked in conjunction and moments in which they diverged. By the end of the 1870s, this new newspaper (founded in 1878) was recognised as a "friend" of the SLP by the party leadership.[37]

[36] Tony Michels, *A Fire in their Hearts. Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
[37] Philip Van Patten, "Report of the NEC to the 2nd National Convention of the Socialist Labor Party of America, Allegheny City, PA, 26th December 1879," in Socialistic Labor Party, *Proceedings of the National Convention of the Socialistic Labor Party Held at Turner Hall, Allegheny City, PA, Commencing Dec. 26th, 1879* (Detroit: National Executive Committee, 1880), 5-17; cf. infra, chap. 6.

The *Volkszeitung* piece, titled "The Chinese Question in the United States," contextualised the issue of Chinese immigration within the history of the country. It described Chinese immigrants as "obedient" and "willing to learn" slaves, while accusing the Republican Party of incoherence, as it refused to stop "yellow slavery" in the same way as it campaigned to abolish black slavery before 1865.[38] The *Volkszeitung* article relied heavily upon historical materialism to build its analysis. It focused on economic production and the use of human groups as a means of production. But, due to the contingencies of internal class dynamics and relations between the labourers and the Six Companies in particular, Chinese workers were not given the treatment one would expect within a purely historical materialist framework. While acknowledging that Chinese immigrants were victims of the international dynamics of exploitation determined by the spread of capitalism, their characterisation strongly relied upon racial stereotypes. In fact, this article, unlike Rusticus's, did not refrain from openly discussing conflicts between different races. The *Volkszeitung* piece mixed historical materialism and racial theory, and the struggle between workers and capitalists became intertwined with the competition between opposing races.

The two approaches were deployed in parallel. On the one hand, the article contextualised indentured work within the international economic system: Chinese exploitation was presented as the last consequence of a general situation which resulted from recent global economic developments, the growing interconnections between states, the opening of China's borders to foreigners, and the increasing mobility of workers (as a result of the expansion of capitalism). All these factors led the *Volkszeitung* article to conclude that China was not the only problem. "In East India, 200 million workers are also to be deprived, who are willing to undercut all other wage workers." And the issue was important not only in California, but also in Oregon, the Washington Territory and British Columbia, and more

[38] "Die Chinesenfrage in den Ver. Staten," *Wochenblatt des New Yorker Volkszeitung*, May 1, 1880.

broadly in other English-speaking colonies such as New Zealand, but also Borneo, Java, and Sumatra.

On the other hand, economic development was presumed to have impacted on the evolution of racial groups, and to have shaped their social and cultural features. This was the reason why Chinese workers were viewed as "naturally" servile:

> This yellow race has been bred for tens of thousands of years by the forces of nature and their history to live and thrive with every climate and on any type of land, and to be obedient slaves, or to be able to play the ravaging robber. In this field it can no longer be outdone by the much younger white race, which is required to maintain an advanced culture. Capitalism in China is so ancient that we whites could learn from them. The Chinese question is thus the question of whether capitalist or communist culture is to have the upper hand.[39]

In this socialist analysis, geographical and historical elements had combined with political and economic circumstances to shape the "character" of the Chinese people. Curiously, the Chinese mode of production, a preindustrial system based on trade and agriculture, was portrayed as "capitalism"—a definition which the father of historical materialism Karl Marx would have strongly disputed. In the analytical framework presented by the *Volkszeitung* article, racial categorisations actually outstripped distinctions based on class: Chinese workers were first and foremost *Chinese*, and only secondly were they workers. At one point, the socialist journalist argued that "with the coolies comes along the mess, the plague, cholera, the defaults, the social vices, the syphilis, the worship of idols and the darkest superstition." In this analysis, considerations based on race came to obscure an analysis rooted in

[39] Ibid.

international working class solidarity. The practical solution to the "Chinese Question" offered by the *Volkszeitung* article recalled that given by Rusticus – to prosecute coolie labour and coolie importation as slave trade in the federal courts – but the arguments presented to defend it were different. While Rusticus only implicitly suggested that Chinese culture was naturally servile and too diverse to be assimilated with white culture, the *Volkszeitung* made explicit appeal to theories of race and recalled the presumed historical background of Chinese immigrants to show the inevitable incompatibility of Chinese workers.[40]

However, not all those writing in the *Volkszeitung* subscribed to the idea that Chinese immigrants were incompatible with "white civilisation." Two articles published between 1880 and 1882 detailed socialist attempts to negotiate the conviction that Chinese immigrants came from a naturally "servile" culture with the tenets of labour internationalism. These articles rested on racist premises, but they attempted to offer a progressive solution to the issue of Chinese immigration. The issue at stake, once again, was indentured labour and Chinese workers' relationship with the Six Companies. What these articles proposed was to offer Chinese immigrants American citizenship:

> It is clear that those Chinese who sign up for civil rights cannot be coolies any longer, but must have finished their service to the Six Companies, or having immigrated freely, because by becoming citizens here they expose themselves and their families to the heaviest penalties in China.[41]

These articles brought together the two positions explored in the previous pages: the internationalist position based on the distinction between importation and immigration and

[40] Ibid.
[41] "Das Bürgerrecht der Chinesen," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, May 8, 1880.

the racist one based on the idea that Chinese workers must be expelled because they were all "coolie workers." The *Volkszeitung* article of 1882 stated:

> For those Chinese, becoming citizens is a real liberation from slavery, which we should not prevent, but on the contrary promote, as long as a swamping of the land with coolies is not a threat. They are thus less dangerous to us than if we wanted to make them a despised and degraded caste. They then learn to speak the language of the country, and you know where you are with them. They get used to our customs and way of life gradually, and gradually lose what we find disgusting in them. Soon they will not be undercutting the wages of our workers and petty bourgeois as they do not make bad competition.[42]

The position expounded in the *Volkszeitung* was a hybrid: it started from the racist premise that people coming from China belonged to a degraded culture; but it also incorporated elements of the internationalist position, holding that Chinese people had a right to remain in the country (even though on the assumption that assimilation would erase their supposedly inferior cultural habits).

The conclusion of the article reiterated socialist commitment towards the respect of universal human rights, with the socialist journalist claiming:

> We workers must not forget that here civil rights and human rights are guaranteed, and that we must not deny this, if we do not want to cut the ground away and delegitimise all our aspirations towards true democracy, towards the destruction of classes and towards justice. Our nation has a right to exclude any kind of

[42] "Das Bürgerrecht für Chinesen," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, April 1, 1882.

> immigration as an indigestible thing, whether for a limited time or forever, and not to apologise for it before other nations, and not to beg for their permission to do so. It has a right to prohibit entrance to and to send back to their homes any sort of immigrant who has brought here under closed labour contracts from abroad, or is enslaved here. But it has no right to exclude from citizenship and participation in popular sovereignty any person it allows to stay in the country, and who has fulfilled, or seeks to fulfil, his constitutional conditions.[43]

The *Volkszeitung* article shed light on another possible variation within the range of socialists' positions. By arguing that Chinese immigrants had the right to stay in the United States and to become American citizens, it gave substance to the socialist internationalist tenet of universal rights without any distinction based on race or nationality. Ironically, though, it did so starting from the premise that not all men were equal in the first place. The *Volkszeitung* article explained that the aversion towards Chinese immigrants was profoundly *cultural*. The way in which the German American paper framed its proposal revealed the mistrust towards people whose language, physical appearance, and habits were strikingly different. For however strongly socialists contested the unfair competition of Chinese immigrants, the problem with them seemed to lie on a much deeper level. There is a further paradox to note: the *Volkszeitung* took it for granted that obtaining American citizenship was a *feasible option* for Chinese immigrants, without realising that this was not the case. The fact was that Chinese immigrants were not allowed to apply for citizenship as a result of the Burlingame Treaty, and several challenges to the law made by Chinese immigrants were rejected in the 1870s.[44]

[43] Ibid.
[44] McClain, *In Search of Equality*, 70-73.

The socialist press offers a last example of the commixture between discourses of race and internationalism. This was the case with "Leo," an anonymous socialist militant who commented on the "Chinese Question" in the *Socialist* in 1879.[45] Leo discussed the problem of Chinese immigration starting from two premises. The first was a firm faith in the coming of socialism, understood as a new historical phase ("the highest state of civilization") that would re-order social relations into a cooperative form. The second premise was the belief in the idea of "race," more specifically the contemporary scientific theory that racial intermixing between different racial groups harmed their respective physical and social characteristics.[46] Leo, more clearly than any other article discussed above, declared his belief in scientific racialism:

> I believe in race, and in this point I am supported by many of the most prominent Socialists and enlightened thinkers of the day. To mingle the blood of four hundreds millions of Chinese (not to speak of other Mongolian nations), with that of forty millions of whites and four millions of Africans, would deteriorate the whole mass, and yield a human product as bad, or worse, than the mongrel mixture of red, white and black races of Mexico and South America.[47]

Given Leo's two premises, the socialist argued that Chinese workers could come to the US on the condition that they undertook "cheap labor" and "especially if, as is the case with the Chinese today, they do not seek to stay and mingle with us," as this would "threaten to deteriorate the superior race."[48] For Leo, white civilisation was "superior" not because it was

[45] Cf. infra, chapter 2.
[46] These theories were made popular in the US by pro-slavery intellectuals such as Josiah Nott and Louis Agassiz. Cf., *The Ideology of Slavery. Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860*, ed. Drew Gilpin Faust, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981); infra, chap. 2.
[47] "The Chinese question Again - Leo's Reply", *Socialist*, March 8, 1879.
[48] "The Chinese Question," *Socialist*, February 15, 1879, 3.

intrinsically better than the Chinese, but because it was closer to the highest stage of civilisation, i.e. socialism. Indeed, a couple of lines later, the socialist militant specified that "I do not, in this letter, wish to inculcate that the Chinese, because they are heathens, are also barbarians … I merely assert that their civilisation is different from ours, and that at present we cannot assimilate." Leo stated that, given this situation, Chinese workers could come to the US to work to be paid in gold and silver, which in the future socialist society would be worthless, and in the meantime would learn about socialism and take the theory back to China. "They will then become missionaries and agitators in their own country to work a similar revolution there."[49] Leo concluded his letter by reiterating that he understood the plight of Chinese workers, but that at present he must prioritise the defence of American people:

> I think a great deal of the question of justice to the poor Chinaman: but at present I am too deeply interested in dragging from starvation and degradation our own dear wives and children, and saving them from the death-grip of our accursed monopolies, which are devouring the life and soul out of them, to pay too much attention to the inhumanely persecuted Mongolian just now.[50]

In the racial order described by Leo, international solidarity came after racial solidarity. Leo understood that "this does not quite coincide with the theory of the universal brotherhood of all mankind," but his firm belief in scientific racialism left him resolute in his convictions.

The articles discussed in this section shed light on the changing and unstable ways in which socialists used both race and class to comment on Chinese immigration. Socialists used the two *at the same time* while debating the problems involving Chinese immigration in the

[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

country. Class exploitation went hand in hand with scientific theories of race, and the two were closely interlinked. In describing the Chinese culture as naturally "servile," socialists used a racially-charged prejudice to describe a condition of class exploitation. Conversely, in proposing to grant Chinese immigrants American citizenship socialists attempted to fix a perceived condition of racial inferiority by enforcing their ideals founded on class and labour solidarity. In most of the cases analysed, such as Leo's and the articles in the *Volkszeitung*, socialists reflected the perceived urgent need to find ways to adapt socialist tenets to scientific theories of race, as if only by respecting these theories socialism would acquire political and intellectual credibility. Ultimately, these articles illustrate the circumstance in which many socialists were trapped during the late 1870s and 1880s.

## "Sie kommen!" Racial paranoia in the socialist press

The SLP moved from a more progressive, putatively race-blind position in 1879 to a vigorously anti-Chinese stance after the approval of the Anti-Chinese Bill in 1882. Throughout this period socialist analyses fluctuated between the defence of Chinese rights to settle in the US and calls for the closure of the Western borders. This section analyses a group of articles that illuminate how racial prejudices came to frame the interpretation of the social and economic circumstances faced by Chinese workers. In their commentaries on labour issues, these socialists interposed a set of political, cultural and social barriers between themselves and the Chinese workers. The fear of the racially diverse pervaded socialists' conceptualization of the "Chinese Question." As a result, in many cases developing a substantive internationalist perspective on Chinese immigration became almost impossible within the SLP, let alone promoting some sort of mobilisation or party organisation of Chinese workers.

Socialists pointed the most disparaging accusations at Chinese workers. In a letter published in the *Labor Standard* in 1877, Walter Scott from San Francisco reverted to the comparison between "black" and "yellow" slavery claiming that "Chinese slavery is worse in its moral and physical effects than Negro slavery in the South was." Indeed, according to Scott, the "Negro was confined principally to the cotton fields," while "the Chinese are being put by their masters in most all branches of mechanics, and will in time completely supplant free white labor, both male and female, unless the people unite and crush out the evil here as they did in the South."[51] Implicit in Scott's point of view was that Chinese slavery was worse than black *from the perspective of white workers*, whereas the points of view of Chinese immigrants and African American slaves were not contemplated in his analysis.

Elsewhere in the *Socialist*, an anonymous militant from San Francisco protested against Chinese consumers' habits. The correspondent contested the "humanitarian ideas of some of your correspondents," which held that Chinese people had the same "inalienable rights" as people "born and bred on the soil." The problem, maintained the worker, was that "these Chinamen make all the coarse garments worn by our labourers; all, or nearly all, the boots and shoes our men and women wear; they make all the cigars; they pack and label the drugs, quack medicines, and bitters, but they don't take them – they are not such fools. They smoke but few cigars; they wear shoes and clothing imported from China or made in 'Chinatown'."[52] In other words, "they supply what white men and women consume, but they do not consume what white men and women produce – at least to a very limited extent." The correspondent described a racially separated consumers' market, in which Chinese workers were purposely limiting what they consumed in order to accumulate earnings and threaten white workers' economic and social positions. Racial prejudice brought the *Socialist* correspondent to read events through the lens of racial competition, and to define

[51] Walter Scott, "The Chinese Question," *Labor Standard*, February 3, 1877.
[52] Ibid.

consumption patterns in terms of paranoid anxieties over a perceived foreign threat, instead of understanding them as the consequence of varying socioeconomic situations and cultural habits. The Californian worker concluded that the theory of the "inalienable rights…will do very well for a Beecher, but to me it seems a queer kind of Socialism; and if that's what it is, I'd rather not take any of mine."[53]

Another way of racialising the image of the "coolie" worker was a less sophisticated yet effective strategy based on emphasising the alleged immorality of Chinese immigrant societies. Several articles shed light on this process. In June 1876, the *Socialist* published two pieces on Chinese immigration. The first referred to gambling, prostitution, and overcrowded and unhealthy living conditions as characteristic of the Chinese quarter. It then went on to describe the systems of control employed by the Six Companies, based on the system of financial checks used by the Chinese *huiguan*, and concluded with an episode of work sub-contracting used by a cigar company to hire three hundred Chinese workers.[54] The second article gave details of the practice of enslavement: it reported a contract signed by a Chinese woman before reaching the US, in which she agreed to "give her body" to a Chinese entrepreneur "for service as a prostitute for a term of four years" in exchange for $690 and free passage to America. The article concluded bluntly: "Let us rid this land of loafer and slave. We have the power. Let us organize!"[55]

The allegation that "enslavement" was a fundamental feature of Chinese immigrant labour went together with the insistence on the lack of morality, virtue, or a sense of freedom among Chinese immigrants. The emphasis on prostitution and the disregard for the condition of women, the description of the unhealthy conditions of life, and the lack of respect for

[53] "The Coolie Question," *Socialist*, March 22, 1879, 3. "John" is "John Chinaman", a nickname frequently used in this period to indicate Chinese immigrants; "Beecher" was Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887), the American clergyman, social reformer and abolitionist. Cf. Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: the Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Three Leaves Press/Doubleday, 2006).
[54] "The Golden Gate," *Socialist*, June 24, 1876.
[55] "Chattel slavery revived," *Socialist*, June 24, 1876

workers' rights, all invested the term "coolie" with negative connotations. These articles were less detailed than Rusticus's in explaining the dynamics of exploitation within the Chinese American community, but by constructing sensationalist images of degradation and depravity among Chinese immigrants they were much more effective in creating a racially-charged emotional impact amongst frustrated white workers.

The levels of paranoia were even greater in other articles. At times, socialists represented a situation in which white workers faced an incoming invasion of "coolies," framed as a real threat to white workers. R. J. Mills, from San Francisco, sent a letter to the *Socialist* in which he openly declared:

> In the economic conflict between Coolie labor and white labor, the latter will be driven to the wall and the Coolie element will destroy Caucasian civilisation, by destroying the Caucasian labourer and through him the middlemen—for that will be the inevitable consequence if the importation of Coolies is not speedily stopped.[56]

Mills depicted an apocalyptic scenario, in which Peru, Chile, and the West Indies were already "flooded with Coolies." Chinese indentured workers, according to Mills, had already "crossed the Sierra and Rocky Mountains, and the vast Plains, and are rapidly marching on to the other States of the Union, and are driving the Caucasian before them."[57] In some socialist descriptions analysed in the previous section, coolie workers were described as lacking agency; docile tools in the hands of capitalists. Accounts such as Miller's were more extreme: here Chinese workers were seen as being motivated by a predatory will to conquer the country. This marked a shift in socialists' perception of Chinese immigration. According to

[56] R. J. Mills, "To the editor of the 'Socialist'," *Socialist*, July 8, 1876.
[57] Ibid.

Mills, the problem was not just capitalist exploitation. There was a much bigger threat of cultural obliteration and annihilation: "Bad as I have many a time pictured Caucasian civilisation, it has some redeeming principles—Chinese barbarism has not."[58] Barbarism, in Mills's opinion, would be the future of the Caucasian race if Chinese immigration was not stopped.

The same language and arguments were used in some pieces in the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*. In an article titled "Sie kommen!" ("They are coming!"), the newspaper criticised the decision of some train companies to open up new cheap lines from West to East. This, according to the article, would cause an invasion of Chinese workers to the East Coast. To convince the readers of the peril of this situation, the journalist focused on the problems found in California Chinatowns:

> The neighbourhood of the town bordered by Broadway, California, Kearney and Stockton Street is home to a population who is separated in customs and manners from the rest of the American population; who, if distributed according to the provisions of the Apartment Act, would take up an area as large as the city of Oakland; who is inaccessible to civilization, is not integrated with us, lives in slavery in contravention of Federal laws, is subject to a foreign monarch, breaks our health and police regulations, endangers the position of our population and undermines the morals of our youth.[59]

The article continued over two columns, describing Chinatowns as refuges for hoboes, prostitutes, and opium smokers. The journalist asked for California Chinese suburbs to be moved outside the white communities, and for relations between white and Chinese people to

[58] Ibid.
[59] "Sie kommen!," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, March 13, 1880.

be prohibited. As the *Volkszeitung* was published in New York, with a predominantly urban east coast readership, the denunciation of the "Chinese danger" was not rhetorical hyperbole, but suggested a real concern for the future of US society.

During the late 1870s and early 1880s, socialist commentaries on the "Chinese Question" increasingly turned away from the race-blind internationalist position, and abandoned the distinction between Chinese immigration and Chinese importation. Instead, the racialised image of the "coolie" dominated discussions of Chinese immigrant labour; in some instances, a rhetoric of sympathy and solidarity towards Chinese workers persisted, but overall pejorative racial assumptions began to predominate, and many socialists turned their criticism on the Chinese workers themselves, as much as on the corporate system of the Six Companies which made their situation distinctive.

## The SLP and the workingmen in California before and after 1882

Institutional relations between the SLP and labour associations in California evolved together with the socialist shift of opinions from a pro-immigration to an anti-immigration stance. As noted earlier, Kearney's Workingmen's Party of California was founded after he was denied access to the local sections of the WPUS (later SLP). The situation became more intricate in early 1878. The German section of San Francisco, the same group which wrote to the SLP leadership to protest in favour of the approval of the "coolie" resolution, decided to support Kearney's organisation in the elections of June 1878, and for this reason was expelled by the SLP's National Executive Committee. Still, the surprising success of the Workingmen's Party of California in the 1878 elections was met with enthusiasm by labour circles in the East, as it represented an extraordinary result for a workers' party. Not only did the WPC elect the mayor of San Francisco, but with its thirty elected delegates out of ninety it was also in a position to influence the drafting of the California State Constitution.

The problem was that, as historian Alexander Saxton notes, the WPC representatives in the California Constitutional Assembly were completely ineffectual on the issue of workers' rights. Their main achievement was to turn the "Chinese Question" into a national issue; but no improvement of workers' rights was ever implemented by Kearney's party.[60] Only a few months after the elections of 1878, the International Labor Union, the organisation founded by Friedrich A. Sorge and Ira Steward in New York, pointed to the weakness of the WPC: "We are sorry to see that neither the Kearney platform, nor the socialist democratic platform contain [sic] a plank favoring the Eight Hour issue; but we may still hope that such a plank may find its way into the new Constitution of the State to be framed and may be adopted by popular vote."[61] The ILU's hopes were in vain. In the report of the 1879 SLP Convention, the newly formed San Francisco sections of the party reported that they were "doing their best to educate the rank and file of the W.P.C. in [SLP] principles," although for the moment they had not nominated an SLP ticket, "deeming it unwise and imprudent at present to divide the forces of the labor movement."[62] The leadership of the SLP developed a strange relationship with Denis Kearney, whereby it criticised the leader for his political shortcomings but admired his electoral successes. Socialists in California tried to move the policies of the WPC away from their anti-Chinese stance and neutrality in terms of workers' rights, but at the same time the leadership of the SLP toyed with the idea of joining a ticket which included Kearney and the Greenback Labor Party in the Presidential elections of 1880.[63] Ultimately, the SLP leadership attacked the WPC over its labour policies, but was far less severe regarding its anti-Chinese racism. After the SLP dropped its coolie resolution in the 1880 platform, no official stance came from the party leadership on the issue of Chinese

[60] Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 113-132.
[61] "The Workingmen's Victory in California," *Labor Standard*, July 7, 1878.
[62] Socialistic Labor Party, *Platform, Constitution and Resolutions, Together with a Condensed Report of the Proceedings of the National Convention held at Allegheny, Pa., December 26-31, 1879, and January 1, 1880* (Detroit: National Executive Committee, 1880), 12.
[63] Cf. Infra, chap. 4.

immigration. As the articles in the previous section showed, there were many in the party who did not support Chinese immigration; but this sentiment did not crystallise into an official position.

The socialist response to the approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 helps shed light on the evolution of the situation. After the approval of the bill the powerful Chicago section sent a report in which it declared that two of its leaders had attacked as "un-American and un-Socialistic" the anti-Chinese measure. The Corresponding Secretary of the party, Philip Van Patten, published the report in the monthly party paper, the *Bulletin of the Social Reform Movement*, adding in parentheses his "response" to the initiative undertaken by the section:

> Abstractly perhaps they are right, but as "self-preservation is the first law of nature" and there are many Socialists who deny that it is our duty to permit the lowering of our standard of living, or further degradation of our working people, it is at least unwise in our friends to go out of their way to create dissension over this subject.[64]

With this convoluted expression, Van Patten suggested that the embattled SLP already had enemies on its right (the WPC, which was less radical that the socialist faction and had a weak record in defending workers' rights), and did not need to open another front on its left by "creating dissension" over the recent government ban on Chinese immigration. Indeed, the report of the SLP San Francisco section celebrated the approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the fact that "all political divisions over these questions have ceased and white people are

[64] "Party News," *Bulletin of the Social Labor Movement*, May 1882.

nearly unanimous in demanding that John 'must go'."[65] Van Patten was implying that Californian socialists were firm in their opposition to Chinese immigration—Chicago activists should take note of this and not put the party into a difficult situation.

By 1882, American socialists, like the two leaders of the Chicago section that rejected Chinese exclusion, were now a minority who did not enjoy the support of the party's leadership. That leadership, meanwhile, was keen to go after the consensus achieved in the white workers' circles in California. Analysis of the socialist press confirms that the approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act suppressed even the few voices that in 1882 were still arguing against the closure of the American borders to Chinese immigration. Immediately after the Bill's approval, the *Volkszeitung* published a short article that, borrowing its title from the WPC motto "The Chinese must go!" demanded not only that the Chinese be prevented from entering the US, but also that the "yellow mass" already arrived in California be sent back to China. Other comments in the following months continued along the same line, suggesting that Chinese workers should be asked to provide compensation for any damages incurred during the period of free immigration, and asking that Chinese people in America be ordered to stop running their businesses in order not to interfere with businesses run by white workers.[66]

The Anti-Chinese Bill did not work to stop the episodes of racism and violence against Chinese immigrants and, in actual fact, led to the worsening of the situation. Kwong and Miščevič suggest that "it was as though the Senate vote [which passed the Bill] had sent a signal to the vigilantes for an 'open season' on the Chinese."[67] Between 1882 and 1890, a sustained series of episodes of racial violence hit Chinese communities across the country. In the words of Chan Kiu Sing, a Los Angeles social commentator and police court interpreter,

[65] Ibid. "John" stood for "John Chinaman", the nickname at times used in periodicals of the period to indicate Chinese immigrants. Cf. fn. 46.
[66] "Die Chinesischen Durchgangs-Regulationen," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, February 10, 1883; "Über die Antichinesen Bill," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, March 1, 1884.
[67] Kwong and Miščevič, *Chinese America*, 107.

"they call it exclusion; but it is not exclusion, it is extermination."[68] This new climate of anti-Chinese sentiment was reflected in the socialist newspapers as well. In 1885, the *Volkszeitung* published an article from Eureka, Humboldt County (California), which chronicled a town meeting to discuss the forced expulsion of all the Chinese from the city. The article criticised the fact that these Chinese would end up in San Francisco.[69] Ten months later, in an article titled "Chinesen gegen Weißen" ("Chinese against whites") published originally in the *San Francisco Abend Post*, complaints were made about hidden agreements between the Six Companies and capitalists to exclude white workers from factories.[70] In another piece, the socialist newspaper reacted vehemently to an article in the *New York Times* which suggested Chinese repatriation was not viable because whites were no longer capable of doing certain kinds of physical jobs performed by Chinese immigrants. On the contrary, it asserted, whites would have been happy to replace Chinese and, like white Southerners who started to work in the fields after the abolition of chattel slavery, they would begin to occupy jobs previously held by Chinese immigrants.[71] Arguably the most overt anti-Chinese piece in the socialist press in this period was published in 1886 in the *Volkszeitung*, and discussed whether the Anti-Chinese League was "un-American" or not. The journalist listed all the typical anti-Chinese points, from the fact that they were only interested in exploiting and monopolizing lands, mines, and industries, to the accusation that they were completely unwilling to integrate, and had made no contribution to American culture, choosing instead to remain isolated in their ghettoes. Lamenting that in the US there were already six million African Americans and many millions of white immigrants, the article concluded that the aversion towards the Chinese was completely justified.[72]

[68] Quoted in Kwong and Miščevič, *Chinese America*, 110.
[69] "300 Chinesen für San Francisco," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, February 28, 1885.
[70] "Chinesen gegen Weißen," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, November 7, 1885.
[71] "Boycott gegen die Chinesen," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, December 12, 1885.
[72] "Ist die Anti-Kuli Bewegung unamerikanisch?," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, March 20, 1886.

In 1886 the SLP started a new official newspaper in the English language, the *Workmen's Advocate*.[73] Its first mention of the "Chinese Question" confirms the trend seen in the *Volkszeitung*. Headed "The Chinese Pest," the article attacked "the so-called moralists, religionists, or mere commercialists" who would like to reintroduce Chinese immigration to the US. In conclusion, the article both summarised and endorsed a pamphlet written by Washington D. Ryan, which argued:

> Our present civilization cannot stand against an unrestricted influx of syphilitic, leprous, cunning and vicious barbarians. And as it is to the working people that our civilization must look for maintenance and progress, to them also must we appeal to defend our people from the Chinese scourge, the direct result of private capitalism, the degrading monster which Labor must in self-defence destroy.[74]

While at the end of the 1870s such overtly racialised attacks on Chinese immigrants formed only one part of the socialist press's coverage of the "Chinese Question," eight years later they had become the norm. From this 1886 article onwards, not a word was written in favour of Chinese immigrants. Both in the *Workmen's Advocate* and in the *Volkszeitung* Chinese people were accused of a wide variety of crimes, from running the business of vice and prostitution in San Francisco's Chinatown, to monopolizing the American cigar market using illegal practices, from enslaving women at work to raping and killing children.[75] The 1880s were arguably the worst years for Chinese immigrants. Abandoned by local and federal authorities, they became scapegoats for social and economic tensions and suffered racial and

[73] The newspaper was founded in 1883, but it did not become the official organ of the party until 1886.
[74] "The Chinese Pest", *Workmen's Advocate*, August 1,1886.
[75] "Chinesischer Madchenhandel in San Francisco," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, January 21, 1888; "Chinesische Cigarrenmacher," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, December 3, 1887; "Chinese Vice in California", *Workmen's Advocate*, May 3, 1890, 4; "Die Chinesenhetze in Milwaukee," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, March 23, 1889.

cultural segregation and victimization. While rare voices opposed these trends, the socialists were not among them.

## Conclusions

The debate on the "Chinese Question" deeply divided the SLP. At first, the leadership of the party reacted by approving a platform founded on a conceptual distinction: free Chinese immigrants were allowed to stay in the country; indentured and "coolie" workers should be set free (and allowed to remain in the US). While this position was progressive in embracing free Chinese workers as immigrants to the United States, as well as seeking to undermine the exploitative dynamics distinctive to much Chinese immigration, it also used and perpetuated the derogatory "coolie" concept in which not only class identities, but also ascribed racial identities, were intermingled. The concept of the Chinese "coolie" labourer, which took root in socialist thought and among labour leaders and the white working class more widely, was reductive and misleading. While Chinese immigrants were subjected to specific forms of exploitation and oppression, they were *not* indentured workers. Socialists projected an image on Chinese immigrants that was shaped by strong underlying racial prejudices, and led them to prioritise affiliations of race over affiliations of class in their political analysis of the "Chinese question."

Categories of race and class were interwoven in socialist discourse, and the SLP and associated socialist groups and newspapers never determined how to disentangle them. The fact that the SLP did at one early point incorporate a pro-Chinese element into its platform suggests that there was, at the time, a real chance this intermingling of race and class issues might be addressed on a political level. But to do so would have required a deeper understanding of the experience of racial prejudice among (in this case) Chinese immigrants; and socialist commentaries, as shown in this chapter, did little more than scratch the surface

on that score. Furthermore, socialists were driven by political expediency and prioritised support for white workers over commitment to the race-blind internationalist position, as both federal law, and specific workers' political organisations (such as the WPC) turned decisively against Chinese immigration – in deeply prejudicial racialised terms. The approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 pushed socialists towards an anti-Chinese position, a tendency that was radically established in the SLP by the end of the 1880s.

# "REGARDLESS OF COLOR:" THE SLP AND AFRICAN AMERICANS BETWEEN RACE AND CLASS, 1876-1890

During the second National Convention of the SLP, held in Allegheny City in 1879, the delegates rewrote the platform and constitution of the party in order to revitalise the activity of the movement, marred by continuous internal strife and disagreements on political matters. A number of changes were finalised to solidify the structure of the organisation, which had suffered from problems of geographic dispersion and lack of leadership. Critically, the delegates also added a key piece of policy to the list of resolutions at the end of the opening platform stating that:

> Whereas, The so-called Democrats (landlords) of the South joined hands with the so-called Republicans (capitalists) of the North; and
> Whereas, This combination of the wealthy men, both North and South, is made for the sole purpose of destroying the liberties of the common people of both sections of our country; therefore, be it
> Resolved, That we urge the working people of the South, regardless of color, to unite with their brothers of the North against the attempts of the ruling class to further impoverish and enslave them by depriving them of the possession and enjoyment of the fruits of their labor.[1]

[1] Socialistic Labor Party, *Platform, Constitution, and Resolutions, Together With a Condensed Report of the Proceedings of the National Convention, Held at Allegheny, Pa., December 26,27,28,29,30 and 31, 1879, and January 1, 1880* (Detroit: National Executive Committee, 1880), 3.

For the first time in its history, the SLP had included in its declaration of principles a plank that clearly referred to the problem of race and committed the party to political action on the issue. Inviting the "working people of the South, regardless of color" to join their anti-capitalist fight, socialists had imagined an interracial alliance that could lead to socialism in both "sections of the country."

The historiography of the early American socialist movement suggests that between the foundation of the SLP in 1876 and the beginning of De Leon's leadership in 1890 the socialist party was silent on the "race question." Historian Philip S. Foner notes that SLP leaders and members were "oblivious" to anything that related to the worsening situation of African Americans in the South, such as "the increasing attacks on [their] political rights… the deteriorating economic position of the black sharecroppers and craftsmen, and the exclusion of blacks from Northern industry."[2] This chapter discusses under-investigated material from German language party sources in order to question Foner's position, which has become established as orthodoxy in the historiography.[3] Through different newspapers and in the histories of local sections of the party, it is possible to reconstruct what was an on-going debate about the conditions of African Americans and their role in a future socialist society. In the SLP there were important and often overlooked members, such as the black teacher Peter H. Clark, who clearly spelt out the interlinking relationship between race discrimination and class exploitation, in turn showing a profound awareness of the problems black workers faced in the South. Others, like Adolph Douai, published in both English and German on the topic and provided detailed information on the economic situation of black communities in the South, putting forward a series of proposals to create ad hoc policies to

[2] Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, CT.; London: Greenwood Press, 1977), 60.
[3] An extensive discussion of Foner's position is available in: William P. Jones, "Nothing Special to Offer the Negro': Revisiting the 'Debsian View' of the Negro Question," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008): 212–24.

obtain their support. Expanding the analysis to the German American press, several articles investigated the social and economic issues of African Americans and discussed how to address them from a socialist point of view.

The analysis of this material shows that there were socialists who understood the situation of African Americans in the South. They saw that blacks' socio-economic conditions had not improved since emancipation and that race discrimination had caused their oppression. However, in many cases SLP members failed to fully come to terms with the political and social implications of the specific conditions of blacks in the South. Commonly, socialists did not believe that it was necessary to have specific policies to counter the racism of Southern whites; conversely, they believed that racial prejudice would vanish in the process of achieving a socialist society, and therefore they concentrated most of their efforts on "explaining" socialism to African Americans. Even if they did not articulate it as clearly as De Leon would do in the 1890s, socialists writing in this period hinted that changes in the class relations of American society would eventually reshape racial relations too.

Ultimately, the problem was that the SLP's position on race was disconnected from the understanding of, and the interaction with, African American workers, and thus, despite the efforts of some members of the party, the SLP failed to attract significant numbers of African Americans to the organisation. Several elements caused the shortcomings of socialists. The first and more straightforward is that the SLP had a geographical distribution in the country that severely limited its interaction with the African American community. The socialist party had almost no presence in the South, where the vast majority of the black population was still concentrated. It was stronger in big industrial cities in the North-East and the Mid-West, such as New York, Detroit and Chicago, but the percentage of African Americans in these places was still infinitesimal in 1890. Secondly, even in those places where there were large African American communities and the SLP had some influence (like Cincinnati, where Peter H.

Clark joined the SLP), the socialists were not an attractive political alternative for black voters. In this period, African Americans needed protection from the rise of Jim Crow legislation, and socialists rarely understood this crucial circumstance. With their utopian plans to abolish capitalism, the SLP offered little to address the urgent needs of the African American community. Lastly, not all SLP members were as supportive of racial solidarity as those who approved the party resolution in 1879. The socialist organisation included white supremacist and racist voices, at times in leading positions and in powerful sections, such as Albert Currlin, a leader of the St. Louis section and a member of the editorial board of the *Volksstimme des Westens*. All of these elements combined help explain why, even in moments of relative strength for the party (such as the 1877-1880 period), the SLP had a chronic problem attracting African American members.

In parallel with these broad elements, there are some additional, more specific, historical circumstances to consider. In 1880, the SLP considered the option to run jointly with the Greenback Labor Party (GLP) in the Presidential campaign. The two organisations had some overlapping political objectives, and in many areas of the country competed for the same electoral constituencies.[4] Had the coalition succeeded, the SLP would have joined its force with an organisation that had a widespread presence in the South and strong support from African Americans. However, the socialist movement split over the possibility of supporting the candidates chosen by the Greenbackers. Divisions did not arise on policies relating to African Americans, on which the two movements agreed, but on the moderate economic platform of the GLP. Key leaders of the socialist party, such as Albert R. Parsons and Paul Grottkau, saw in the coalition a compromise with capitalist forces. The decision of the moderate wing, led by the corresponding secretary Philip Van Patten, to go ahead with the coalition caused a split in the party and precipitated a deep crisis that lasted for ten years.

[4] Mark A. Lause, *The Civil War's Last Campaign: James B. Weaver, the Greenback-Labor Party & the Politics of Race & Section* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 39-45.

The history of the attempted coalition with the GLP confirmed, if only implicitly, that in this period socialists were still unable to find ways to conjugate their struggle for workers' economic rights with a genuine commitment towards racial equality.

## The African American image in the socialist mind: interracial alliance and the problem of mobilisation

In order to investigate socialist policies on African Americans in the late 1870s, it is necessary to reconstruct the image of the black worker in the socialist mind.[5] In this period, SLP members produced several investigations into the socio-economic conditions of African American workers in the South, and into the strategies to integrate them into the party. An analysis of the content of these articles suggests that, in the vast majority of cases, SLP members rejected the conservative rhetoric that saw the African American as an idle and un-manageable worker. Socialists saw African Americans as comrades in the struggle against capitalism, and understood the necessity of focusing on the black workforce as the key social agent for change in the South.

But by focusing on the intellectual construction of the image of the African American in socialist sources it is possible to appreciate further elements of this description. In many cases, socialists focused on an abstract image of the African American worker rather than on real people in the South. SLP members described broad categories, but rarely went deep down to explain how class relations within the black communities developed and how economic relations in the various Southern states functioned. Ultimately, this tendency caused several problems for the SLP's understanding of race, and its implementation of policies towards African Americans.

[5] The phrase "the image of the black worker in the socialist mind" is a borrowing from: George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

In the months between the end of 1877 and the first half of 1878, the *Labor Standard* received several appeals to organise African Americans within the International Labor Union, the labour association opened in early 1878 under the lead of Friedrich A. Sorge.[6] Socialists writing to the *Labor Standard* expressed their willingness to organise black workers. Crucially, they recognised blacks as the social actors to whom the socialist organisation should first and foremost address its emancipatory action in the South. Yet, these articles also hinted at the problems socialists faced, most notably social insularity and the impossibility of relying upon a solid organisation structure around them.

The first letter came from a North Carolinian member, who began his message by clearly stating that "the condition of our colored fellow workmen in the Southern States is very deplorable."[7] The socialist reported that he had travelled around the state and seen with his own eyes the oppression of freed blacks, who "[had] been taken from a kind of serfdom to another." He further added "many of them are in a more wretched condition than they were in during the worst days of chattel slavery." At first sight these assessments give the impression that the North Carolinian militant conflated the situation of antebellum chattel slavery with that of contemporary wage slavery, a rhetorical figure widespread in labour papers. But in fact, the socialist was attempting to point towards something else: the article implicitly delineates the position against which supporters of race equality in the socialist movement were fighting, namely the common presumption that blacks were naturally idle and compliant. In a revealing passage, the militant stressed that African Americans were still oppressed "but yet they are not willing slaves. There is a wonderful amount of intelligence amongst them and it only needs the introduction of the labor movement to rouse them from their prostate state." The socialist closed his piece saying that "the interests of white and black workmen are alike

[6] Cf. Infra, chap. 2.
[7] "North Carolina. Our colored brothers in the South", *Labor Standard*, November 26, 1877.

and they must stand by each other" and expressing the hope that "steps will be taken to bring our colored fellow workmen into the proposed Labor Union."

Marie Andreef-Edger, a Russian immigrant and the second wife of the English positivist Henry Edger, sent the *Labor Standard* a similar appeal for the integration of black workers. In the message she stated that a Russian friend, a worker on an Ohio farm, had managed to get in touch with some black workers and intended to distribute some copies of the socialist newspaper amongst them. Adreef-Edger added that African Americans were eager to join the movement.[8] Furthermore, P. E. Collie from Philadelphia, a member of the newly founded ILU, wrote to the *Labor Standard* about the political situation in the South. Drawing upon his experience as a wageworker in Florida, he argued that Southern society was essentially divided into three classes: "1st. Whites who had possession before the war—patricians; 2nd. Whites who had no possession before the war—crackers-plebians [sic]; 3rd. Negroes who do all the labor and are considered only when needed—outcasts."[9] The Democratic Party gathered the support from the first two classes of citizens, the Republican Party among the third. However, "during election times the negroes are flattered and deceived by both parties… White workingmen in the Southern States should do their utmost to create splits in the political parties and to bring our colored brothers into the labor ranks."[10]

These letters acknowledged the importance of organising black workers within the ranks of the socialist movement, but they described the situation from a distance. Socialists writing to the *Labor Standard* had second-hand information or had been in the South in the past. They spoke of the "black worker" as an abstract entity and were considerably vaguer when it came to detailing how socialists could materially proceed in this work of organisation. The disjuncture between socialists and African American workers is the result of the

[8] "New York. Labor amongst colored workers", *Labor Standard*, January 9, 1878.
[9] "Labor in the South," *Labor Standard*, June 23, 1878.
[10] Ibid.

socialists' lack of direct experience of the social dynamics that were taking place in African American workers' communities in the South.

Leaders of the party such as Adolph Douai and August Otto-Walster produced extended analyses of the African American socio-economic status and of the potential strategies to engage with black workers. Douai was an especially prominent voice in this debate. It is worth noting that, despite the controversies between trade unionists and political actionists taking place at that time, Douai was one of the few activists who were in touch with both factions at the same time. A charismatic man of learning, and an activist with a relatively moderate position within the party, Douai managed to move harmoniously between the two affiliations, achieving an influential status in the American socialist movement.[11] In a piece published in the 1877 in the *Labor Standard*, Douai explored the chances of the SLP engaging Southern black farmers. He contended that the black population of the South deserved the socialists' "kindest and most careful attention. They are the almost only laboring people there; few of them are anything but wage slaves. Without their gathering into our fold, one half of the country must remain adverse or indifferent to our movement."[12] The German American socialist stated that the "enlightenment" of African Americans should begin in places where socialist trade unions had some presence, such as Baltimore, Washington, Louisville, and St. Louis. By organising African Americans, argued Douai, "we might achieve what otherwise cannot be done – we might loosen the hold of their white employers on them, and weaken the unnatural fellowship of those egoistic ex-rebels with the farmers and mechanics within the National Party of the North."[13] Douai thought that by reaching out to African Americans in the South, the SLP could break the alliance between the National

[11] "Our Loss," *Workmen's Advocate*, January 28, 1888; "Adolph Douai: the gifted and tireless agitator dead," *Workmen's Advocate*, January 28, 1888; Foner, *Black Americans*, 15-29.
[12] Adolph Douai, "Something more about the farming population," *Labor Standard*, May 4, 1878.
[13] Ibid.

Party (i.e. the Greenback movement) and the Democratic Party that, in this moment, controlled vast parts of the South.

Douai further detailed his position on the approach the SLP should have towards African Americans in the *Chicagoer Vorbote*, in an article that sought to analyse the issue "merely from a social-democratic point of view" in order to understand what "we can expect from the Negroes for the purpose of supporting our propaganda."[14] Mixing first-hand knowledge from his time in Texas and more recent information on post-Civil War developments, Douai provided his readers with a description of the social and political conditions of the South that considered racial tensions and economic circumstances as interrelated. First, Douai's analysis divided the population into four large groups: the former slave owners and "their comrades in the exploitation of working Negroes" (upper-level bourgeoisie such as merchants, the clergy, lawyers and politicians); black men and women; the "indigenous poor whites of the South"; and the "immigrant white working population." He went on from this basis to argue that social order in the South was essentially guaranteed by the racial hatred against African Americans shared by the ruling class and the local poor whites. This alliance based on white prejudice made it possible to "bulldoze" African Americans (that is, to prevent them from exercising their free right to vote), to cancel their right of speech and to curtail their right to enjoy the fruits of their work. Douai maintained that racial hatred was so widespread amongst local whites that at the moment it was impossible to convince them to join the socialist side. Still, he thought that the alliance between the local white working class and the ruling class was unnatural and must be broken with the help of white immigrants from the North. Douai stressed that the help of Northern immigrants was the means used by the Greenback party to achieve between six and ten per cent at the elections of 1878, and that Greenbackers should be a model example for the SLP.

[14] Adolph Douai, "Die Negerfrage", *Chicagoer Vorbote*, February 22, 1879, 5.

Douai gave an accurate description of the conditions of the South: from the numerical proportions of each social group to the description of the political tensions and alliances between them, the German American socialist showed a vast knowledge of the situation in the former Confederate states. But he was not exempt from some of the limitation seen in the first articles commented on. It is surprising, for example, that Douai did not give any historical context, and did not even mention the 1877 compromise that led Rutherford B. Hayes to the White House, eluding completely the end of Reconstruction as a critical moment in the history of African Americans' social relations in the US. Furthermore, he did not give any sign of being aware of forms of resistance among black workers or of internal conflicts within the black Southern communities. Recent historical literature has shown how freed slaves, immediately after the end of the Civil War, organised forms of protest against former slave holders to negotiate better salaries and improve their living conditions, and how they organised themselves into workers' associations and moved from one place to another seeking adequate economic and social circumstances. It has also shed light on class conflicts within the black communities and has detailed the role they played in undermining the advancements made during Reconstruction. Douai did not mention any of these elements in his articles.[15]

Douai's description relied on generic social categories. The socialist leader correctly indicated that the "unnatural alliance" between white workers and employers founded on race

[15] On the social composition of the South, cf.: Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Statistics of the Population of the United States at the Tenth Census (June 1, 1880)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1883); Leslie H. Fishel Jr., "The African-American Experience," in *The Gilded Age. Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Lanham, Md.; Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 143-166. On protest movements amongst African Americans: Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1992 [1986]); Eric Arnesen, "The Quicksand of Economic Insecurity: African Americans, Strikebreaking, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era," in *The Black Worker: Race, Labor, and Civil Rights since Emancipation*, ed. Eric Arnesen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) David R. Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (London: Verso, 2014). On class divisions in the African American community, cf. Brian Kelly, *Class Factionalism, and the Radical Retreat. Black Laborers and the Republican Party in South Carolina, 1865-1900*, in *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South*, eds. Bruce Baker and Brian Kelly (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), 199-220.

hatred was the main element that kept Southern social relations together, namely, that the US South was built on racism. However, his analysis was limited by his lack of lived experience of the conditions and people he called the "black worker," the "poor white working class Southern," the "Northern immigrant" and so on. The social groups he discussed were only ever vague and intellectually constructed images.

The limits of Douai's analysis were reflected in the political strategy he envisioned for the SLP. In the final paragraphs of the article Douai formulated the (rather unlikely) hypothesis that in the near future Democrats and Republicans would join into one single party, devoted to defending the interests of the ruling class. In that situation, the social-democratic movement would promote an interracial coalition between Northern immigrants, Southern white workers and the black population to win the majority during the elections, a coalition in which "the negroes would get support and legal protection from the poor whites and the immigrant workers." It would require "a tremendous effort from the North to spread education and political understanding amongst these poor whites," but eventually the interests of the multiracial working class would triumph.[16] If compared with the rest of the socialist press of the time, Douai provided a rather exceptional and in-depth description both of the socio-economic reality of the South and of the political plans that the SLP should have for the uplift of African Americans. Nevertheless, despite his good intentions, Douai spoke of race in the South without a clear understanding of how the dynamics of racism worked. Ultimately, in Douai's articles, the image of the African American in the socialist mind is enriched with some details from the historic context in which blacks lived, yet it remains intellectually generic and incoherent.

To find another article that compares with Douai's in scope we need to move to St. Louis. The Missouri industrial city hosted the second largest section of the party, after

[16] Adolph Douai, "Die Negerfrage," *Chicagoer Vorbote*, February 22, 1879.

Chicago. The spread of the SLP in the local German American community, especially, allowed socialists to publish a German-language daily, the *Volksstimme des Westens*, which was active between 1877 and 1881 under the control of August Otto-Walster, the socialist from Leipzig whose ideas I discussed in Chapter Two.[17] Some months after the opening of the paper, the *Volksstimme* dedicated an article to the behaviour of the African American electorate in the Presidential elections of 1876. The journalist opened with considerations of the apparently incomprehensible move on the part of black voters in the South, who turned their backs on the abolitionist GOP and, with the exceptions of Florida, South Carolina and Louisiana, voted with the party of their former owners for the election of Democratic Samuel J. Tilden as President. The socialist explained this behaviour by suggesting that African Americans voted for "the smallest among two evils:" honest black men in the South, contended the journalist, had genuinely believed in the Republican Party after the Civil War. However, they fell victims to the *Schnappfäckler* (Carpetbaggers), lost faith in the Republican Party, and therefore voted Democrat in an attempt to change their circumstance of social and economic oppression.[18]

The second part of the article analysed the SLP's perspective in the South, providing a much more pessimistic point of view than the one presented by Douai. "Surely," contended the *Volksstimme* writer, "there are negroes who have been friends of the social democratic program for long time." But several things prevented them from having a lasting impact: first, former abolitionists and radical leaders, such as Fredrick Douglass, had now joined the Republican Party in "preach[ing] the harmony between capital and labor"; at the same time, the social-democrats in the South were caught between two fires: they were accused by black Republicans of favouring the return to power of Democrats, and by Democrats of perpetrating the continuation of the corrupt Republican system. Moreover, the spread of the

[17] Cf. Infra, chap. 2.
[18] "Warum die Neger jetzt demokratisch stimmen", *Volksstimme des Westens*, May 2, 1878.

socialist movement was made more difficult by the lack of education and by the nefarious influence of local black churches. In sum, maintained Otto-Walster, the authorities devoted to improve the situation of African Americans had their own political agenda to pursue. Socialists did not have any relevance in this system, and as a result the possibilities of the SLP in the South were very slim. Still, concluded the journalist, the party authorities should promote a propaganda campaign among African Americans: big cities like Baltimore, St. Louis, Louisville and perhaps New Orleans were the places to start.

By focusing on the role of African American leaders such as Douglass, mentioning the problems stemming from a two-party system, and acknowledging the role of poor education and black churches, Otto-Walster provided an analysis much more grounded in the reality of black men than Douai and the socialists discussed above. In Otto-Walster's article, the "image of the black worker" reflected more accurately than ever before the intersecting pressures of socio-economic position and race for African Americans in the US South in the 1870s and 1880s.

The articles discussed in this section show that many socialists in the SLP understood the need to organise African Americans but also how these same socialists struggled to understand the restrictions they would face in pursuing their plans for interracial cooperation for socialist aims. In most cases, SLP members were miles away from the places where they could physically execute their projects, and their analyses were overly generalised and abstract, considering "the South" in its entirety without breaking it down into specific regional circumstances. Socialists recognised that African Americans could be mobilised, especially in Southern cities, but they rarely spelt out how to approach them logistically. Despite these limitations, it would be a mistake to dismiss the sources analysed above as simply irrelevant. It is no coincidence that these articles preceded the approval of the resolution at the Convention of 1879 mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, a plank in

which Southern and Northern workers were invited to cooperate "regardless of color" to subvert the existing capitalist system. The proceedings of the Convention are silent on the discussion that accompanied the approval of the resolution, therefore it is impossible to establish who wrote and put forward the addition to the socialist platform.[19] However, given the affinity between the content of the plank and the message expounded in the socialist press in the years leading up to the convention, it is reasonable to argue that it was precisely the attention socialists members gave to the situation of African Americans which led to the approval of a resolution on this issue in 1879.

## The problems of the SLP: geographical, political and theoretical elements

By going through the socialist press of the time, it is possible to find evidence of the existence of African American membership in the SLP. In August 1878, the Baltimore section of the party wrote in its regular report to the *National Socialist*, the official English-language paper of the party, that "the colored men are now taking an interest in the movement and an attempt will be made to organize there";[20] some months later, in the Chicago-based *Socialist*, "Elmo" informed the SLP membership that "a well-attended meeting of colored men was held … at the call of the colored men's section of the Socialistic Labor Party. These people are taking great interest in our cause."[21] However, these (still notable) cases are exceptional. As a norm, in these years the SLP rarely succeeded in including a high percentage of black members. This section discusses the practical and ideological reasons why socialists struggled to recruit black workers. To understand the SLP's low black recruitment it is necessary to first consider the geographical spread of the SLP vis-à-vis that of the African American population. In the 1870s and 1880s discussed, the

[19] Socialistic Labor Party, *Platform, Constitution, and Resolutions (1880)*.
[20] "Party News," *National Socialist*, August 31, 1878.
[21] "Letter," *Socialist*, July 12, 1879. Quoted in Lause, *The Civil War's Last Campaign*, 60.

SLP was mostly rooted in the urban contexts of the Northern and Mid-Western areas of the country, with a geographical spread that closely matched that of German American immigrants. At the heights of its strength, in 1877, the SLP had eighty-nine sections, seventy-seven of which were located either in the North-East (forty-seven) or in the Mid-West of the country (thirty). Of the remaining, nine were in the South (four in Kentucky, one in New Orleans, and four in St. Louis) and three were in the West (two in San Francisco and one in Sacramento).[22] This gives a solid indication of the diffusion of the party across the US. The SLP was thoroughly spread in states such as New Jersey, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. It had a strong presence in industrial cities like Cincinnati, Detroit and Chicago (where there were three, five and six sections respectively). Some sections were opened in the booming Western cities, whereas the party was basically excluded from the Southern states. Notably, eight of the nine Southern sections were located in border states, which did not secede from the Union in 1861 and whose status had been in-between during the Civil War. Although part of the US South, these states had different social features than those located in the so-called "Deep South."[23]

The spread of blacks in post-Civil War America was essentially opposite to that of the SLP sections. More precisely, with the exception of the handful of militants in New Orleans, the SLP did not even have a single section in all the states where the black population was over 30 per cent, such as Alabama, Virginia, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, and the Carolinas. In cities where the SLP had the biggest sections, such as Detroit, New York and Chicago, the percentage of African Americans in 1900 was still below two per cent. The situation was the same for Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, whose black population fluctuated between 1.1 and 3.7 per cent. These figures are even more telling if compared with those of the foreign born population. To focus just on the three cities mentioned above, in 1900 in the

[22] "Versammlungen der Sektionen der Arbeiter Partei der Ver. Staaten," *Chicagoer Vorboten*, July 1, 1877, 5.
[23] David T. Burbank, *City of Little Bread: The St. Louis General Strike of 1877* (Unpublished microcard, 1957), 33-34.

Greater New York City area the black population was 1.8 per cent (60,666) versus the 37 per cent of foreign born people (1,270,080). The figures were similar in Chicago (1.3 per cent vs. 34.6 per cent) and Detroit (1.4 per cent vs. 33.8 per cent).[24]

These numbers give some initial indications about the failings of the SLP to include African Americans within their party. The scarcity of socialist militants in the areas of the country most intensely populated by African Americans meant not only that the work of recruitment was thwarted by logistical factors, but also that the socialist movement had few voices within the organisation that could provide first-hand information about socio-economic circumstances in the former Confederate states and was therefore forced to deal with the issue abstractly, as the first section of this chapter has suggested. However, the limited diffusion of the SLP in the South could equally be seen as a *consequence* of socialists' lack of opportunity to interact with African American workers. Arguably, had the SLP been better able to gain the support of African Americans, its presence in the South would have increased rapidly. Focusing on the borders of the geographical areas delineated above, the German American populated North-East and the African American populated South, it is possible to identify two cities that partially contradicted the pattern described; that is, cities in which the SLP had a significant presence and where large numbers of African Americans resided. These two cities were Cincinnati and St. Louis. By focusing on Cincinnati and St. Louis, the next pages will discuss further reasons that might explain the shortcomings of socialists. The history of the SLP in the Ohio industrial city was characterised by the presence of the black teacher and politician Peter H. Clark, whereas the socialists in St. Louis surged as a result of the great strike of July 1877.

[24] United States Census Office, *Abstract of the Twelfth Census of the United States 1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), 40-41, 102-104.

***Either Black or Red: Peter H. Clark in Cincinnati***

The 1877-78 Congress of the SLP moved the seat of the National Executive Committee, the leading body of the party, from Chicago to Cincinnati. The Ohio city was chosen because it housed one of the strongest sections of the SLP, which in November 1877 achieved a stunning twenty per cent in the municipal elections.[25] The strike of July 1877 had stirred the labour movement of the city, and the party leadership genuinely believed that Cincinnati, with its strong community of German American radicals and its expanding working class, could be the ideal place to strengthen the structure of the party.

The success was helped by the inclusion on the socialist ticket of Peter H. Clark, a black teacher who had joined the organisation in the first months of 1877. Clark, defined by his biographer Nikki M. Taylor as "America's first black socialist," had a distinctive background. He was born as a free person in Cincinnati in 1829. His father, owner of a barbershop, gave his son a full education. Though public schools were not open to African Americans in Cincinnati, Clark attended private colleges both for primary and secondary school. He completed his studies in 1848 with a diploma from the Cincinnati High School, a private institution founded by the Methodist church minister Hiram S. Gilmore.[26]

During his long political career, Clark cooperated with several key African American leaders, from the Republican leader John Mercer Langston to Fredrick Douglass to Booker T. Washington. His political affiliations were volatile to say the least: throughout the years he was Republican, Socialist and Democratic; an early supporter of black nationalism and emigration to Africa, he joined the Radical Abolitionist Party in 1856 and had close relations with the Free Thinkers and the German American socialist groups led by August Willich in the late 1850s. After the Civil War, he became a leader of the Cincinnati black community for

[25] James M. Morris, "William Haller: 'The disturbing element'," *Cincinnati Historical Society Bulletin* 28 (Winter 1970), 283.
[26] Nikki M. Taylor, *America's First Black Socialist: the Radical Life of Peter H. Clark* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), 28-32.

the Republicans, a position he retained until the early 1880s with two interruptions, the first in order to join the Liberal Republican faction in the early 1870s and the second to support the SLP between 1877 and 1879 (although there are doubts that he actually left the Republican party in this period). With his move to the Democratic Party and his support for segregated schools in his native Ohio in the mid-1880s, he lost any credibility in the local black community and was forced to move to St. Louis for the remainder of his life, where he continued his job as a teacher without any further involvement in politics.[27]

Historians have debated the significance of Clark's experience in the SLP. For Foner, Clark's short-term membership in the party demonstrates the inability of socialists to address the "race question." The presence of the Cincinnati leader in the SLP was a solid chance to promote the adhesion of African Americans to the socialist party. However, Foner maintains that socialists' obliviousness toward race forced Clark to abandon the party. Clark's biographer Nikki Taylor further elaborates on this. She suggests that, during his time in the SLP, the black leader did not connect socialism and race discrimination. She maintains:

> [Clark] never developed a racial critique of socialism: he never criticized either the Workingmen's or the Socialistic Labor Parties for being conspicuously silent on the issue of race or for failing to make any substantive efforts to recruit or organize African American workers .... For him, socialism offered a solution to *economic* inequalities – not racial ones.[28]

There are few doubts that Clark's early resignation from the party represented a blow for the socialist movement in Cincinnati. However, Foner's belief that his abandonment was

[27] Taylor, *America's First Black Socialist*; cf. infra, Chapter 1.
[28] Foner, *American Socialists*, 59; Taylor, *America's First Black Socialist*, 30-39; 154-155. Cf. also Herbert G. Gutman, "Peter H. Clark: Pioneer negro socialist", *The Journal of Negro Education* 34, no. 4 (1965), 413-418; Philip S. Foner, "Peter H. Clark: pioneer black socialist", *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5, no. 3 (1978), 17-35.

motivated by the SLP's lack of understanding of the problems of African Americans should be questioned. Similarly, Taylor is correct when she argues that Clark did not develop a "racial critique of socialism." The point, though, is that for the period in which he remained in the socialist organisation, Clark had a slightly different understanding of the relations between race and socialism than the one Taylor ascribes to him. As I will detail in the following pages, between 1877 and 1879 Clark described socialism as a solution for economic inequalities *and* racial ones. The black activist understood the situation of African Americans in the South as a matter of class and racial exploitation, and he believed that the triumph of socialism could put an end both to economic exploitation and to racial discrimination. This, in my opinion, is the reason why Clark did not develop a racial critique of socialism, and why he did not leave the party because of its lack of policies on African Americans. Clark understood socialism as a race-blind political project, though one which could ultimately deliver racial equality too. He left the party when its strength faded and he acknowledged that there was no hope of achieving any of the political objectives socialists had in mind.

There are few doubts about the quality of Clark as a pioneering leader of the rights of African Americans. His profound commitment to the cause of racial equality emerged early in his life, when he rejected the possibility of replacing his father in the family-owned barbershop, because he did not want to work in a state of subjection to whites. With his anti-slavery political activities in the 1850s, he established himself as a clear-headed and talented leader. His sophisticated understanding of racial prejudice is documented by the words he pronounced in a speech of 1873:

> I do not forget the prejudice of the American people; I could not if I would ... It stood by the bedside of my mother and intensified her pains as she bore me. It

> darkens with its shadow the grave of my father and my mother. It has hindered every step I have taken in life. It poisons the food I eat, the water I drink and the air I breathe … Hercules could have as easily forgotten the poisoned shirt which scorched his flesh, as I can forget the prejudices of the American people.[29]

There was no aspect of the life of an African American individual which was not determined by racial prejudice. In this passage, Clark eloquently explained the personal and intimate nature of the problem, a reality that affected African Americans and left them no possibility of escape.

Clark gave this speech three years before joining the SLP. Already in 1875 he was addressing a meeting of the "Sovereigns of Industry," a workers' society that later took part in the founding of the Cincinnati section of the party. In his speech he praised the virtues of cooperation, as opposed to the avarice and inhumanity of capitalism.[30] Clark delivered his first speech as a socialist in March 1877, during a rally organised by the WPUS. He started the talk with a comment on his sudden switch, saying that he "had been a socialist in heart long before the Republican Party had an existence." It is likely that here Clark was referring to specific biographical circumstances. Clark encountered socialism early in his youth, thanks to the Owenite and Fourierist ideas of the Director of his high school Hiram S. Gilmore. The close connection with Gilmore provided Clark with his first job as a stereotyping apprentice at the studio of Thomas Varney and his wife Maria. The couple was famous for their radical activities, which spanned from communitarian socialism to land-reform and anarchism.

[29] *Dayton Evening Herald*, September 2, 1873. I am thankful to Nikki M. Taylor, who shared with me her knowledge about the subject and pointed my attention to the material I am commenting on in this section.
[30] *Cincinnati Commercial*, November 27, 1875.

During these experiences, the young Clark became acquainted with radical and anti-capitalist literature.[31]

For some time, Clark had been divided between a pragmatic and reflexive approach focused on the defence of African Americans' rights and a more global and radical outlook devoted to the fight against economic inequalities. In the mid-1870s, as a politician extremely sensitive toward the mood of the electorate, Clark sensed that the latter attitude could boost his chances to earn political success. In his speech he gave at the socialist rally of March 1877, Clark boldly declared that "the ideal of a workingmen's democracy which is now attracting the attention of the civilised world will before long triumph over the dominancy of the present party." He moved on to expound an interpretation of international economic dynamics that would have had Karl Marx nodding with approval. He attacked international capitalism, arguing that Bismarck and the English employers shared their interests with the American ruling class. But the most interesting passage from our point of view is one in which Clark connected class and race exploitation:

> Then come into our country. Go into the South and see the capitalists banded together over the poor whites. They carefully calculate how much, and no more, it will require to feed and clothe the black laborer and keep him alive from one year to another ... Not a foot of land will they sell to the oppressed race who are trying to crowd out the degradation into which capital has plunged him.[32]

Clark was talking to an audience of white American and immigrant workers, to whom he articulated the dynamics of race discrimination as a manifestation of class exploitation. Like

[31] *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, March 27, 1877. Other chronicles of these events can be found in *The Emancipator*, March 31, 1877; *Cincinnati Commercial*, 27 March 1877. For Clark's early connections with socialism, cf. Taylor, *America's First Black Socialist*, 30-39.
[32] *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, March 27, 1877.

Douai, Clark argued that the alliance between white capitalists and poor whites, rooted in a shared antagonism to blacks, was creating African Americans' condition of inescapable segregation.

Six months later, Clark delivered a speech in Augusta, Ohio, where he made the connection between race discrimination and the class question even clearer. Against the inhuman tyranny of economy and industrial organisation, he maintained, workers should hold high the torch of morality. The "progress of the race," made possible by the abolition of chattel slavery, served to demonstrate that "there is an underlying and undying moral law governing the relations of men with their fellowmen … The Social Democracy came before the American professing a faith in this underlying moral law." After a detailed investigation into European and American salaries, Clark concluded:

> If he [the American laborer] does not resist at the ballot box, we shall have a Nation of industrial slaves or paupers, governed by an aristocracy of capital. Already in the South this condition of affairs is realized. The unfortunate freedman lies hopelessly in the power of the capitalist, nor does any hope save that held out by migration present itself. There is no remedy for this tendency, save that offered by socialism.[33]

These words explain the way in which Clark connected class exploitation and race discrimination. The black leader used socialist theory to address what he considered the most burning aspect of African Americans' segregation: economic exploitation. In this phase of his political career Clark did not have a focus on civil rights, but he genuinely believed that with the success of socialism a twofold result would be achieved: not only the improvement of

[33] *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, August 25, 1877.

workers' economic conditions, but also the creation of a more equal system of racial relations. With his adhesion to the SLP, Clark did not abandon his commitment towards race equality; on the contrary, he attempted to find a different path to achieve it.

There is a good deal of truth in Foner's idea that the departure of Clark was a lost opportunity for the SLP. The political "weight" of Clark in Cincinnati's local scene is excellently described in an alarmed article of the Republican *Cincinnati Enquirer* about the "colored vote" in 1877, where a supporter of the GOP denounced the lack of political rewards for the black electorate. "The consequence," argued the writer, "will be that, in the ensuing election that takes place this fall, a great many colored men will vote for the Democratic ticket, a large number will follow Peter Clark and vote for the Workingmen, and others not vote at all."[34] Clark was an important political leader who was able to influence the black vote in Cincinnati. Therefore, the SLP's inability to prevent Clark's departure was definitely a problem. However, doubt can be cast on Foner's point that Clark abandoned the SLP because of socialists' blindness on the "race question." Unlike Foner, the evidence discussed in this chapter suggest that his decision was provoked by several causes, amongst which are the dynamics within the Cincinnati section, the inability of the SLP to provide the Cincinnati black community with political protection and, finally, personal interest, namely Clark's growing disappointment with the inability of the SLP to secure any political position for him.

The radical activist William Haller had a key role in bringing Clark into the SLP. A sergeant in the Union Army during the Civil War, Haller was elected onto the City Council of Cincinnati in 1865 but lost his seat almost immediately, after he revealed his "red" commitment to workers' rights. Later he was part of the Labor Reform Party (the political spinoff of the National Labor Union) and of the People's Party, the same short-lived organisation August Willich had joined in 1873. In the WPUS he arguably achieved the apex

[34] *Cincinnati Enquirer*, August 7, 1877.

of his political career. Not only did he immediately join the party, but he also launched a weekly newspaper, *The Emancipator*, which helped to establish the local reputation of the WPUS during the 1877 strike.[35] Clark and Haller had known each other since a national convention of the Labor Reform Party in 1871. It was Haller who invited Clark to the meeting of the "Sovereigns of Industry" in 1875 and later convinced him to join the WPUS.[36] Haller clearly understood the importance of having a black member in the Workingmen's Party. These are the words he used in *The Emancipator* to launch Clark's nomination as School Commissioner for the party in 1877:

> Peter H. Clark of all the candidates on the ticket, most thoroughly represents the contest between laborers and capitalists, of the proscribed race, whose sorrows made the name of the United States the synonym of robbery and murder throughout the world; his nomination is therefore above all others the finest vindication of the claim, that the "Workingmen's Party" is a purely cosmopolitan organization.[37]

Clark himself acknowledged the importance of racial inclusion and cosmopolitanism in his friend's thinking, when, at the time of Haller's death in 1881, he was called on to deliver his eulogy. Arguing against Haller's opponents, Clark made the point:

> But the wide-spread sorrow felt because of his death, this assemblage, composed of men of various races, various religious views, various conditions of society, shows that all men did not believe the slanderous charges … That all races should

[35] Morris, "William Haller"; on Willich's People's Party, cf. infra chap. 1.
[36] Taylor, *America's First Black Socialist*, 135.
[37] *The Emancipator*, August 18, 1877.

> be represented here is eminently proper, for the cry of the oppressed in any land found a ready response in his heart.[38]

There can be little doubt about the strength of Haller's commitment on interracialism within the WPUS. But the point is that Clark did not abandon the WPUS/SLP because of conflicts about this position. There are other more relevant elements to consider.

Clark mentioned some critics of Haller during his funeral speech; in actual fact, Haller had many. Since his early steps in the labour movement, Haller had been a stubborn and intransigent defender of electoral politics. In his opinion, the ballot box was the "Archimedes's lever" given by the American political system to rapidly overthrow exploiters and achieve control of government.[39] He did not believe in trade unions, compromises or piecemeal improvements. Even when Sorge and his followers left the party in 1877, he was still complaining about the excessive attention the SLP gave to trade unions. In 1878 he was hired by the St. Louis section as an English-language agitator, but his experience lasted only a few months because the leaders of the section did not agree with his anti-trade union stance. Returning to Cincinnati, he escalated the conflict between the National Executive Committee of the party led by Van Patten and the German section, and was eventually expelled from the party in 1879.[40] Clark seemed to share Heller's antipathy towards trade unions. In a speech during the July 1877 strike, he declared:

> Trades unions, Grangers, Sovereigns of Industry, cooperative stores and factories are alike futile. They are simply combinations of laborers who seek to assume

[38] "Citizen William Haller", *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, March 4,1881.
[39] *Labor Standard*, November 25, 1876.
[40] Morris, "William Haller", 284-286; "A card from Wm. Haller", *Socialist*, December 12, 1879; Eliott J. Kanter, "Class, Ethnicity, and Socialist Politics: St. Louis, 1876-1881", *UCLA Historical Journal*, 3 (1982), 46-47; J. Ehman to Philip Van Patten, January 28, February 5, 6, 1880, Incoming Correspondence, Papers of the Socialist Labor Party of America, Microfilm edition, Nottingham, Hallward Library.

> toward their own unfortunate fellows who are not members the attitude that the capitalist assumes toward them.[41]

One may wonder, then, whether the progressive unpopularity of Haller's and Clark's position had a role in provoking the black teacher's abandonment of the party. The resignation letter Clark sent to the NEC of the SLP gives further elements to consider. Clark referred to an attempt to remove him as principal of the Gaines school. He reported that he could stop it only because the black community "came as one man" to rescue him.[42] Clark continued saying "I really belong to that people; I really belonged to them from my childhood."

This episode encapsulates the mix of motivations behind Clark's resignation, which arose out of several intertwined interests. As he clarified in his letter, the separation was not intellectual. In the letter Clark specified that he still considered himself a socialist, and that he still believed that "there is not, under the sun, any method except through the party, by which the difficulties that surround the Labor platform can be solved."[43] Therefore, the real reasons for his resignation have to be sought elsewhere. First, it must be noted that with the expulsion of Haller from the party, Clark lost the connection which had brought him into the organisation and was left as one of the few members of the party still defending an anti-trade unionist stance. Secondly, the complete fiasco of the SLP at the 1878 elections, in which Clark was on the socialist ticket for Congress, made evident two interlinking points: first, that the SLP was not destined to have the central role in the local and national political scenario that Clark had envisaged in 1877; secondly, that the local black community was not interested in following him into the socialist ranks. In sum, by remaining a member of the SLP, Clark was at a dead end: not only did his affiliation threaten his job, but more importantly, as a politician, the black leader was not able to provide any sort of protection to

[41] *Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 23 1877, 8.
[42] *Cincinnati Commercial*, July 22, 1879.
[43] Ibid.

the black constituency that had supported his political career until now. Ultimately, the choice for Clark was a matter of interest: to keep his job, to keep his social position, and to keep some possibilities open for his future political career, he was forced to go back to the Republicans.

Clark expressed some of the most advanced and fully developed analyses of the relation between class and race to be found in the socialist press of the time. He believed that racial discrimination was intimately connected to economic inequality, and from this point of view he saw socialism as a theory that could address both issues. Albeit in an unstructured form, Clark articulated opinions that anticipated those of black socialists writing decades later, like Hubert Harrison and W.E.B. Du Bois.[44] But his attempts to combine the fight for racial equality and the struggle to achieve socialism failed in the face of the SLP's political weakness.

***The SLP in the South: St. Louis and the "Negro Exodus"***

Cincinnati was not the only place where the SLP could interact with a large African American community on a regular basis. The party also had sections in St. Louis, New Orleans and Kentucky. However, the sections in Kentucky barely left any trace of their existence, and New Orleans's group was perennially "under construction." The group in St. Louis, in contrast, could rival Chicago and Cincinnati in terms of numbers and strength, with around one thousand activists divided between German immigrants (six hundred), English-language speakers (three hundred), French and Bohemian immigrants (the remaining one

[44] Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: the Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2009); David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993); Dan S. Green and Earl Smith, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the concepts of race and class," *Phylon* 44, No. 4 (1983), 262-272.

hundred).[45] In actual fact, the case of St. Louis is even more emblematic than that of Cincinnati: while in the Ohio city the SLP enjoyed a sudden surge after the strike of 1877, just one year later it was in profound crisis as a result of internal conflicts and a lack of connection with the local trade union federations.[46] Conversely, the St. Louis section regularly performed successfully during the elections between 1878 and 1881. In other words, while it would be possible to argue that the Cincinnati section was too weak to plan actions to organise African Americans, the same cannot be argued for St. Louis.

The SLP's ranks swelled after the events of July 1877, when the city was blocked for a week by a massive workers' revolt orchestrated—in a rather casual and unplanned way—by SLP leaders. In the words of David T. Burbank, the revolt of St. Louis was the "first general strike in US history."[47] Started as a resolute but peaceful attempt by the railroad workers of East St. Louis to negotiate better wages, the strike turned into a week-long general revolt that united skilled and unskilled workers, black and white, under the leadership of the socialist WPUS. The history of the strike is paradoxical but instructive. On Sunday 22nd, the WPUS members moved to East St. Louis to show their support for the railroad workers on strike. However, in the space of twenty-four hours they had gathered so many supporters in St. Louis that they could easily move on with a non-stop series of demonstrations and rallies over the following days. Soon the strike leaders themselves realised that they were losing control over the crowd. By Wednesday 25th, the leaders of the WPUS, who until that moment had organised the events of the protest, called off further marches to avoid the risk of violence. Even if the Democratic newspapers of the city repeatedly boasted that the Internationalists were amassing weapons in their deposits and were ready to turn the city into

[45] Burbank, *City of Little Bread*, 33-34. On the section of New Orleans, see: *Chicagoer Vorbote,* September 28, October 12, November 8, December 10, 28, 1878; *Volksstimme des Westens*, December 24, 1878, June 19, December 16, 1879.
[46] Selig Perlman, "Upheaval and Reorganisation (from 1877)," in John Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, (New York: MacMillan Company, 1935-1936), 2:282.
[47] David T. Burbank, *Reign of the Rabble. The St. Louis General Strike of 1877* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1966), 59.

a new Paris Commune, the strike ended on Friday 27th with the St. Louis police arresting the WPUS leaders. Not a single shot was fired. The allegedly incendiary revolutionaries were caught while attempting to jump from the windows of the party headquarters and were jailed in disgrace. In two days, the federal troops stopped the last remnants of the strike and by the next Monday calm had been restored to the town.[48]

The events in St. Louis are not only a powerful symbol of the incredible level of social conflict in the US in 1877 and of the weaknesses of the political parties that were supposed to represent workers. They are also an interesting turning point in the relationship between black and white workers, and in the role the WPUS-SLP had or could have had in organising forms of protest across racial lines. The protest was interracial from its very beginning. An unidentified "Negro speaker," who was later included in the first provisional Committee of the strike, addressed the first general rally at Lucas Market.[49] The *St. Louis Daily Tribune* reported that on Tuesday morning W. H. M. Knight, a black steamboatman, asked the crowd: "Will you stand to us regardless of color?" He received resounding answers of "we will, we will." Newspapers continued to record the presence of black workers in the following days too.[50]

However, in the words of the SLP leader Albert Currlin, who was interviewed by the *St. Louis Daily Tribune* two weeks after the strike, the moment when the Committee of the strike started to realise that it was no longer able to control the "mob" was precisely when a vast group of African Americans joined the protest. "On Wednesday," Currlin told the reporter, "there was a large crowd gathered about that we didn't want to have anything with. They were loafers and niggers and made up nothing but a mob."[51] The German socialist went on to

[48] Burbank, *City of Little Bread*; Burbank, *Reign of the Rabble*; Kanter, "Class, Ethnicity, and Socialist Politics"; Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York; London: Pathfinder, 1977); Robert V. Bruce, *1877. Year of Violence* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970).
[49] Burbank, *City of Little Bread*, 33.
[50] *St. Louis Daily Tribune*, July 25, 26, 27, 1877.
[51] *St. Louis Daily Tribune*, August 4, 1877.

detail how, having failed to keep the demonstration limited to "only workers," the socialists decided to abandon the rally:

> Before the hour for starting a gang of niggers, it looked like about 500, came to Turner Hall and sent word that they wanted to join our party. We replied that we wanted nothing to do with them, and it was this gang that started and led the processions that did the mischief.[52]

The appeal for solidarity made by the steamboatman Knight on Tuesday was falling on deaf ears. White socialists did not want to mingle with black workers, and some quickly came to blame them for the failure of the strike.

Historian Alison Clark Efford suggests that Currlin's response needs to be contextualised within a wider analysis of the mid-Western German American community. The appeals for economic citizenship launched during the strike of 1877 came at the end of a period in which the German American community had explored the possibility of joining forces with African Americans to fight a common struggle for social and economic rights. According to Efford, opinions such as Currlin's demonstrated that by 1877 that project had failed. German Americans had abandoned progressive and egalitarian principles during the early 1870s in order to pursue their own nationalist agenda and to obtain social prestige in American society. By analysing the coverage of the strike in German language papers, Efford concludes the German American bourgeoisie saw German American socialists as a threat to their recently acquired social status, and the interracial nature of the strike acted as a further confirmation of the potential danger to the established order created by socialists. "Black

[52] Ibid.

protestors," contends Efford, "symbolized the anarchy that socialists had unleashed on the city."[53]

Efford provides a solid rationale to explain why German American socialists wanted to distance themselves from African Americans. According to the American scholar, socialists' requests for economic rights could be successful only insofar as they did not threaten the social order of the city. This implied that they could not be interracial. But Efford's argument needs to be taken out of the history of the Midwestern German American community and reformulated within the development of the early socialist movement. One way to do it is to examine the material published in the *Volksstimme des Westens*, the German-language daily of the local section edited by August Otto-Walster and where Albert Curllin also worked after he was released from jail. By focusing on the paper's coverage of African American issues, it can be argued that Currlin's point of view was but one among many perspectives the socialist community had to offer.

The *Volksstimme* was an exception in the landscape of the socialist press of the time. It was one of the two daily papers of the SLP (the other was Chicago's *Arbeiter Zeitung*). It covered both local and national news, and it provided a completely different point of view from those given by the other German-language dailies of the city, such the Carl Schurz's *Westliche Post* or the Democratic *Anzeiger des Westens*. Compared with the other socialist papers, both those in English and those in German, the *Volksstimme* was remarkable for presenting by far the most regular and detailed coverage of news that related to African Americans of the day. The paper not only included analyses of the political behaviour of the black electorate, such as the example given in the first section of this chapter; it also featured

[53] Alison Clark Efford, *German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 232-233. Efford's analysis is built on the theories of David Roediger, especially David Roediger, "'Not Only the Ruling Class to Overcome, but Also the So-Called Mob': Class, Skill and Community in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877," *Journal of Social History* 19 (1985-86), 213-239; David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 167-168.

local news which involved black politicians, appeals launched by African Americans in various regions in the South, and other news items relating to black political engagement. the *Volksstimme* was exceptional it was because it was closely connected to the peculiarity of St. Louis itself, which was the gateway of the goods travelling by train from the North-East and the mid-West to the West and a historic crossroads on the Mississippi for people and material going from South to North. St. Louis was organically part of the South, and for this reason the attention of public opinion towards the socio-economic conditions of the Southern states was highly prominent.[54]

The variety of opinions put forward in the *Volksstimme*, which ranged from white supremacism to attempts at interracial cooperation, reflects the fact that the SLP did not have a clear approach to the matter. Journalists followed their personal inclinations rather than keeping to a precise editorial line. This lack of a clear political approach to defend created an eclectic mix, where we can find specific instances of race prejudice alongside specific defences of African Americans, as well as some abstract appeals to class solidarity across the "color line." In some cases, socialists voiced opinions consistent with that of Albert Currlin. Just two months after the foundation of the paper, the *Volkstimme* printed an editorial (already mentioned in the introduction of this thesis) which discussed the presence of "Indians, Negroes and Chinese in Nord America."[55] The opinions of its author, Robert Mills, could easily have been included in a pro-slavery publication written by Southern white supremacists during the first half of the nineteenth century. Mills argued that, as the "nature of the American Indian" forced Native Americans to fight against whites (and eventually perish before the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon culture), so did "an unswerving natural law [say] that [an African American] will never work voluntarily, but only when he has to, or

[54] Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: the Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
[55] Robert Mills, "Die Indianer, Neger und Chinesen in Nord-Amerika," *Volksstimme des Westens*, November 2, 1877.

when he is forced by the whip or by hunger." Later in the article, referring to the Civil War, Mills argued that the white race "had already suffered too much because of blacks, who are of no use for the humanity." He concluded that "the question, 'are the Negro culture capable' must be answered in the negative." Mills built his argument using the geographic determinist and scientific racialist approaches that the second chapter of this thesis has discussed. Geographic conditions determined the behaviour of the different human races: whites could live and work in temperate climates whereas blacks performed favourably in hot ones. Mills maintained that the abolition of slavery was justified according to "human rights," but it violated ethnographic laws, because whites were not supposed to work in places as warm as the US South.

In November 1877 the socialist daily published a letter from the Charleston correspondent of the *New Yorker Staats Zeitung*, in which the journalist gave a racially-charged description of African Americans in the South. The article contended that "unfortunately the mass of coloured citizens today is still incredibly ignorant; the only thing it knows is the value of money." The *Staat Zeitung* added that African American men were divided between an old generation unable to work as a result of the marks left by the physical exploitation they had suffered before emancipation and a younger generation characterised by "work-shy, hedonistic and confrontational" behaviour. Such descriptions spread negative stereotypes of the African American population among the socialist readership and were consistent with the opinions of Currlin and Mills.[56]

However, the *Volksstimme* also published articles on the other side of the argument. Just one week after publishing the *New Yorker Staats Zeitung* correspondence, the socialist daily reprinted a letter signed by five hundred women from New Orleans and sent to Benjamin Butler, a former Union Army general and one of the most proactive supporters of

[56] "Die Neger in der Familie als Staatsbürger und Arbeiter," *Volksstimme des Westens*, November 12, 1877.

Reconstruction policies in Congress until 1877. The women referred to the case of a black man who was killed because he was accused of stealing a cow. The man was left on the road together with the carcass of the animal and no one was allowed to remove him. Repeated cases of violence like this, argued the women, were forcing blacks to leave the state against their will.[57] Another public appeal, a desperate "cry for help" (as the article titled it) addressed to the President, to Congressmen, and to the Republican and the Democratic parties, appeared in the *Volksstimme* in April 1879. The appeal, written by an assembly of African American citizens of New Orleans, detailed the situation of despair of blacks in Louisiana, commenting on how they were beaten and persecuted for their support for Republicans and how they were denied the opportunity to improve their present state of ignorance and poverty: "If you call us uneducated, so this is not the fault of us, but of whites, because they call it a crime to teach us to read the Bible."[58] The *Volksstimme* attached a short note to the appeal, in which it mocked with irony "the 'noble race' that is born here" (i.e. the white aristocracy) and its alleged "Great Republic" for failing to respect the rights of its citizens. Finally, another article (this time reprinted from the *Milwaukee Herald*) attacked the anti-emigration laws approved by Mississippi and other states, arguing that the Southern aristocracy was still violating African Americans' basic civil rights by disposing at will over their freedom to move.[59]

An event that invariably attracted socialists' comments on the situation of African Americans was the "exodus" of 1879, during which thousands of blacks from Louisiana, Texas and other Southern states moved along the Mississippi River and through St. Louis in order to settle in Kansas. As detailed by historian Nell Irvin Painter, the migration process began in the first months of 1879, even though its organisation was underway well before,

[57] "Die Neger in Süden," *Volksstimme des Westens*, November 20, 1877.
[58] "Ein Nothschrei," *Volksstimme des Westens*, April 26, 1879.
[59] "Sind die Neger im Süden frei?," *Volksstimme des Westens*, February 16, 1880.

thanks to the work of Henry Adams and Benjamin "Pap" Singleton.[60] Socialist reactions to African American "exodusters" were cold, to say the least. On the day of the arrival of the first boats on the levee, the *Volksstimme* reported on the event, wondering who told African American Southerners "that a trip North would be as the arrival in the Promised Land for Jews" and further questioning what would happen once black workers had spent the little money they carried along with them.[61] In a series of other articles published in 1879, the *Volksstimme* gave its readers further details about the presence of African Americans in town. It reported some initiatives undertaken by the city authorities to control the flow of immigration and detailed the opinions of Republican politicians on the origin of the phenomenon. The socialist paper blamed the Republican authorities, their more direct adversaries on the local scene, for failing to find credible solutions for the groups of African Americans forced in St. Louis by their lack of funds to continue the journey to Kansas. However, despite reporting on the event, on no occasion in these articles did the *Volksstimme* express the idea that the SLP should offer relief to the black "exodusters" in their attempt to reach Kansas.[62]

Ultimately, the diversity of opinions expressed in the *Volksstimme* was the outcome of specific circumstances internal to the socialist organisation. The SLP, a geographically scattered and loosely organised movement, produced a vast array of alternative points of view on race, from superficial appeals to mobilise African Americans and broad analyses of the Southern socio-economic system to racist denunciations of the supposedly inability of African Americans to work. The St. Louis German American section, with its strategic geographical location and its political strength, was the most important context in which the

[60] Painter, *Exodusters*; Brian M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007).
[61] "Die Negerwanderung," *Volksstimme des Westens*, March 17, 1879.
[62] "Über die Flucht der Farbigen aus dem Süden," *Volksstimme des Westens*, April 21, 1879; "Die Negereinwanderung," *Volksstimme des Westens*, July 15, 1879; "Über Neger-Auswanderung," *Volksstimme des Westens*, September 22, 1879.

party discussed the issue. But the diversity of theoretical stances was not advantageous in the support of practical measures: what is evident is the limited capacity of the SLP to undertake practical initiatives to support African Americans, either those on their journey to Kansas or the established residents of St. Louis. The "colored men's section" mentioned by Elmo in the *Socialist* is the only hint of a socialist presence among the local African American community to come to our notice.

## The Greenback Alliance and the SLP after 1880: how class overtook race

Apart from approving the resolution that invited black workers in the South to join the socialist movement, the SLP Convention of 1879 discussed another theme relative to the presence of socialists within the former Confederate states and, by extension, to their possibilities to embrace and organise African Americans: an alliance with the Greenback-Labor Party.[63] The GLP was born in 1878 from the Greenback movement, an organisation founded by Western and Southern farmers to demand the institution of a non-gold backed currency of exchange. Over time, the movement had included in its programme labour issues such as shorter working hours and the increase of wages, and by 1878 it had managed to elect fifteen Congressmen and poll around one million votes.[64] The possible alliance was extremely important for the SLP because the Greenbackers, unlike the socialists, had been able to create a fracture within the solid bipolar party system and achieve a significant presence in the Southern states of the country. At its 1878 Convention, stresses historian Matthew Hild, the GLP featured delegates from many Southern states, such as Arkansas,

[63] Socialistic Labor Party, *Platform, Constitution, and Resolutions, together with a condensed report of the proceedings of the National Convention, held at Allegheny, Pa., December 26,27,28,19,30 and 31, 1879, and January 1, 1880* (Detroit, 1880).
[64] Lause, *The Civil War's Last Campaign,* 3-38; Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, and Populists: Farmer-Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 22-42.

Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.[65] By joining forces with the GLP, then, the socialist party could solve what the previous sections of this chapter have identified as a key problem: the fact of being present only in the North and the Midwest of the country.

There were further elements that prompted socialists to envision a coalition with the GLP. Before 1878, the SLP had dismissed the Greenback movement as a capitalist party. The emphasis on currency reform was perceived by socialists as a pretext for neglecting key labour issues. However, after 1878 in some local contexts the two parties started to cooperate on a regular basis. As documented by historian Mark A. Lause, SLP branches in Detroit, St. Louis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Boston, Newark and Grand Rapids hosted GLP speakers, took part in GLP meetings and organised joint events. However, Lause further contends that, crucially, "the explosive growth of the GLP directly undercut the SLP."[66] It is very likely then that the faction that sponsored the GLP alliance, which included Adolph Douai, the Secretary of the Party Philip Van Patten and many English-speaking leaders of the big section of Chicago, saw in the coalition a chance not only to work on the inclusion of African Americans in the party but also to strengthen the socialist presence in the North.[67]

Reflections on the opponents of the coalition with the GLP give further indications on the nature of the debate on race that was taking place at the time in the socialist movement. The fact that the St. Louis SLP leader Albert Currlin, a supporter of white supremacism, opposed the coalition may suggest that the will to keep African Americans outside the organisation was the main reason to reject the alliance. But other evidence points in different directions. One of the most vocal opponents of the coalition was Albert R. Parsons, leader of the SLP in Chicago and later one of the "Haymarket Martyrs." His background and ideas

[65] Hild, *Greenbackers*, 23.
[66] Lause, *The Civil War's Last Campaign*, 39-42.
[67] Ibid., 61-84.

were totally incompatible with those of an opponent of the presence of African Americans within the socialist movement.

Albert R. Parsons was an American radical, a native of Montgomery, Alabama, that had moved north with his wife Lucy Parsons in 1873. Their political activities in favour of African Americans had played a significant role in forcing them to relocate outside the South. Parsons's fight for racial equality had started a few years after the end of the Civil War. In 1868, aged nineteen, he had founded a weekly in Waco, called *The Spectator*, in which he advocated "the acceptance, in good faith, of the terms of surrender, and [support for] the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth constitutional amendments and the reconstruction measures securing political rights of the colored people."[68] The paper was short-lived, and political enmities forced him to move to Houston, where he found a job as a secretary in the Republican-dominated Texas Senate. Whereas when based in Waco he travelled across the state to campaign for African Americans' rights, in Houston he continued his work as an officer of the state militia, patrolling the city to protect black citizens against white harassment. But circumstances changed and, by 1873, the Democrats were back in power, ready to dismantle the Reconstruction government of the Republicans. Parsons lost his job, and some months later he and his wife decided to move to Illinois.[69]

Given this background, it is completely improbable that Parsons's argument against the GLP was based on the will to keep African Americans outside the party. And in fact, his fundamental reason to oppose the coalition – based on thinking that was similar to that of many other socialists in this group – had little to do with race; rather, it was connected to the party's class politics. Parsons's progressive switch from being an activist for African

[68] Albert R. Parsons, *Life of Albert R. Parsons with Brief History of the Labor Movement in America* (Chicago: Mrs. Lucy E. Parsons Publisher and Proprietor, 1889), 9.
[69] I followed the critically reconstructed version of Parsons's story that can be found in Avrich, 3-55. It differs in some points from Parsons's own autobiographical account (Parsons, *Life of Albert R. Parsons*, 6-23). Cf. also James Green, *Death in the Haymarket. A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Anchor Book, 2006), 55-59.

Americans' rights to a labour leader is instructive of the ways in which class-based concerns overtook race in the Northern social context. The socialist leader wrote in his autobiography that, once settled in Chicago in 1873, he had rapidly become interested in the "labor question," investigating as a journalist on the *Inter-Ocean* the case of the "Relief and Aid society," an organisation set up to distribute funds raised after the great fire of 1871. Parsons soon found out that workers had good reason to denounce the corruption of the Relief and Aid Society. Crucially, he further added that he "also discovered a great similarity between the abuse heaped upon these poor people by the organs of the rich and the actions of the late southern slave-holders in Texas toward the newly enfranchised slaves." Parsons connected his former commitment toward African American civil rights with the defence of wage workers in Chicago. He identified a common pattern of exploitation, based on what he termed "a great fundamental wrong at work in society and existing social and industrial arrangements."[70] Even if Parsons did not further elaborate in this section of his short autobiography, it is reasonable to assume that the "great wrong" he was referring to was economic inequality – the unbalanced allocation of resources which caused the state of poverty experienced by both white workers in Chicago and blacks in the South.

It is therefore clear that, in the time he spent in Chicago, Parsons came to see the "race question" as part of the "labor question" that hampered workers and forced them into wage slavery. Lucy Parsons, the wife of the socialist leader, wrote clearly on this issue in 1886 in the *Alarm*, the anarchist paper launched in 1883. Commenting on the lynchings of thirteen blacks in the Carrollton, Mississippi area, she downplayed the importance of racial oppression in the analyses of the events. She denied that "outrages" were "heaped upon the

[70] Parsons, *Life of Albert R. Parsons*, 10.

Negro because he is black." "Not at all," she wrote. "It is because he is poor. It is because he is dependent."[71]

In sum, Parsons's trajectory is instructive not only of the reasons that guided many SLP members to reject the coalition with the GLP, but also of the ways in which class came to overcome race in the priorities of 1880s socialists. Parsons did not reject the alliance over disagreements on the inclusion of African Americans. As detailed above, Parsons was a staunch defender of African American rights, and he would have surely welcomed an expansion of the SLP in the South. The problem, though, is that Parsons believed that nothing good could come from an alliance with the GLP either for white workers in the North or for black workers in the South. In other words, Parsons consciously prioritised the realisation of his radical plans over a moderate compromise that could potentially help the diffusion of the SLP in the South, but would have irreparably compromised the fight for a truly revolutionary change of economic relations in the country.

Ultimately, the pro-coalition group decided to go ahead despite the firm opposition of Parsons and the vast majority of the German American constituencies of Chicago and St. Louis. But the poor electoral result of the GLP-SLP ticket led by James B. Weaver, which gathered around 300,000 votes and three per cent on a national basis, was the deathblow of the strategy put forward by Van Patten. The SLP was abandoned not only by people attracted by the radical plans of Parsons but also by others who abjured political activity and decided to focus on trade unionism instead. A case in point is Peter J. McGuire, formerly one of the greatest supporters of political action, who in 1881 dusted off his past as a carpenter and founded the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, a forerunner of the American Federation of Labor.[72]

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[71] "The Negro: Let him leave politics to the politicians and prayers to the preacher," *The Alarm* (April 3, 1886), quoted in David Roediger, *Seizing Freedom*, 205.
[72] Mark Erlich, "Peter J. McGuire's trade unionism: socialism of a trades union kind?," *Labor History* 24, Issue 2 (1983), 165-197.

By the end of 1882, Parsons and the core of his group had replaced the SLP in Chicago. Already in 1880 August Spies had succeeded Grottkau as the new editor of the German-language papers *Chicagoer Vorbote* and the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, whilst Parsons had founded the *Alarm* to address the English-speaking section of the Chicago working class. In 1883 the group federated with a faction of New York former socialists, amongst which were Justus Schwab and Wilhelm Hasselmann. In two years, this new political formation openly embraced anarchism and joined forces with the International Working People's Association (IWPA). The English-section of the SLP in Chicago was reduced to "a corporal's guard," in the words of German American activist George Schilling. One of its most important leaders, Thomas Morgan, retired from politics, whereas Schilling temporarily stepped back from active engagement only to join the anarchist faction in late 1882. In the same year the SLP moved its National Executive Committee from Detroit to New York, the only place where it still retained some followers. But its already precarious condition was worsened by another event, namely the sudden disappearance of Philip Van Patten, who went missing in April 1883 leaving behind a suicide note. The effects of this episode were immediate: two months after his disappearance, the English-language monthly *Bulletin of the Social Labor Movement* started to be published half in English and half in German. By the end of 1883, it had ceased publication and the proceedings of the third Convention of the party, held in Baltimore in December, were published only in German. A plank proposal of a German member of the party from Brooklyn exemplified the moment of deep crisis that was affecting the party. This proposal, published in December 1883, started from the premise that the political movement failed because of a lack of knowledge of the English language, and suggested therefore that now "the Party should no longer engage in politics, but concentrate all its efforts upon the support of the movement in Germany and the 'scientific development' of Socialism."[73]

[73] Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1984), 68-98;

Even during its period of crisis SLP members reiterated the will to work for African Americans: two months before its disappearance, the *Bulletin* published a letter from a "veteran socialist" from Texas, an English immigrant who arrived in the US in 1848 and sent his greetings from "down South." The letter was introduced by an unsigned note, which stated:

> There is much work to be done yet to enlighten and organize the slaves of the South – both white and colored – and we hope that in the near future the seed will be sown broadcast over the Sunny South and bear fruits among them that will ripen to be food mentally and physically for the poor and oppressed, and – poison for the oppressors.[74]

The same idea was reiterated in another note, published on the same page, where a journalist added further reflections on the issue of the *farbige Arbeiter* (non-white workers) in German. The socialist reported the ideas of John Reichle, a party member from Lynchburg, Va., who had visited the SLP headquarters earlier that month. Reichle's opinions were not free of prejudice. He argued that "the working class, which is there [in the South] almost invariably composed by the black race itself, is, as a consequence of this composition – unfortunately! – ignorant and idle." Moreover, Reichle stressed that, despite the success of a strike of the tobacco workers, it was always difficult to have the support of African Americans, especially when proposals for improvement came from whites. The socialist journalist reporting

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Timothy Messer-Kruse, *The Haymarket Conspiracy: Transatlantic Anarchist Networks* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 69-99; George Schilling, *History of the Labor Movement in Chicago*, in Parsons, *Life of Albert L. Parsons*, XXI; Brad Rockwell, *Secret Lives of Philip Van Patten* in *The Record 2010: Fifty-First Edition*, eds. Isabel B. Anthony and Elizabeth Robbins (Hot Springs, AK: Garland County Historical Society, 2010), 15-31; *Bulletin of the Social Labor Movement*, June-December 1880; Sozialistische Arbeiter Partei, *Officielles Protokoll der National-Convention der S. A. P., abgehalten ab 26, 27, 28 December 1883, in Baltimore, Md.*, Reel 35, Papers of the Socialist Labor Party of America, Microfilm edition, Nottingham, Hallward Library.

[74] "Affairs 'Down South'," *Bulletin of the Social Labor Movement*, October 1883, 8.

Reichle's opinions concluded the piece by arguing that the declarations from Texas and from Virginia attested that in the South there was still much to be done. "Our party reserves the right of the working class of the South – the Negroes – to emancipate." These opinions perfectly encapsulate the situation of the party with regard to the "race question:" despite the willingness to act, socialists were blocked by their political weakness, their limited knowledge of the situation and their own prejudicial ideas. The SLP had scattered militants across the South that could do nothing more than voice their opinions and send reports north. They had no chance to organise anything, and at times shared the common prejudices against blacks, as the case of Reichle testifies.

The situation did not change much between 1883 and 1890. Yet, in this period in New York there were partners who could have benefitted the socialist movement. To give an example, the page of the *Bulletin* discussed above was printed only a few months before T. T. Fortune, the African American editor, published *Black and White: Land, Labor and Politics in the South* and, more importantly, established his first newspaper, the *New York Freeman*. The headquarters of the socialists, in St. Marks Place, was just two miles from Fortune's downtown Manhattan office, but the level of interaction between the two organisations remained as if they were located on the opposite sides of the country: zero. It would, however, be naïve to expect more. The German American community of Manhattan, with its 160,000 inhabitants and its thriving radical world, was a big enough horizon for the SLP, which at this point was reduced to a tiny and insular organisation of around one thousand members.[75]

[75] Timothy T. Fortune, *Black and White: Land, Labor and Politics in the South* (New York: Ford & Co, 1884); Shawn L. Alexander, *T. Thomas Fortune, the Afro-American Agitator: a Collection of Writings, 1880-1928* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

## Conclusions

Between 1876 and 1890, socialists repeatedly discussed the place of African Americans in the American society. For some socialists, such as Douai and Clark, the problem of racial discrimination was connected with economic inequality. Racial prejudice was seen as a feature of society which caused the economic and social segregation of African Americans. Yet elsewhere, socialists either did not understand the specific problems of blacks or openly embraced white supremacism and supported the idea of the biological inferiority of the black race.

This diversity of opinion around race in the SLP demonstrates that, between 1876 and 1890, socialists did not have clear theoretical tools to systematise racial discrimination within their thinking. Socialists did make efforts to connect African Americans' struggles with those of workers in general, attempting to go beyond the colour line, but appeals for interracial cooperation were scattered and formulated in abstract terms. The general political record of the party on African Americans was weak. Although some members of the party called for the inclusion of African Americans and sought the approval of a resolution invoking an interracial coalition between Southern and Northern workers, sections in Cincinnati and St. Louis did not undertake any significant action to organise their respective local black communities.

In the early years of the SLP the development of an effective political strategy that addressed African Americans' issues was discouraged by precise historic circumstances, such as small African American population in the SLP's urban strongholds in the North and Mid-west (New York, Detroit and Chicago) and the relative weakness of the socialist party in the cities where the African American community was larger (St. Louis and Cincinnati). But, on a more profound intellectual level, only rarely did SLP members manage to go past their implicit tendency to prioritise economic citizenship for white workers over the respect of

social and political rights for African Americans. The attempted alliance between the SLP and the GLP in 1880 could have changed this scenario. However, differences over political strategy led to the failure of this project, sounding the death knell on the attempt to translate the diversity of opinions within the early socialist movement into a firmer commitment toward racial equality.

*Chapter 5*

# SAVAGE CAPITALISTS, CIVILISED INDIANS: THE SLP AND NATIVE AMERICANS, 1876-1890

In 1878 the *Volksstimme des Westens* reported the results of a study on the American Indian population conducted by S. R. Clark from the Bureau of Education. Surveying the population estimates given by the Spanish, French and British authorities to the American government at the beginning of the century and the federal data available for the last eighty years, Clark argued that the population decline of the Native American tribes was far less dramatic than might appear at first sight. The estimates of former European colonial powers were largely exaggerated. Moreover, Native Americans could now rely upon much improved sanitary conditions, as a consequence of the federal control imposed in the late 1860s and 1870s. Even though reliable figures on birth and death rates in the Indian tribes were difficult to collect, evidence suggested that the Native American population was stable if not increasing. Clark concluded that "the ordinary theory of the decline and disappearance of the Indians at the contact with the civilization of the white needs to be significantly modified, if not completely abandoned."[1]

History would prove Clark wrong. However, the fact that the St. Louis-based paper gave favourable coverage to his research suggests that socialists, too, believed that the idea that Native Americans would simply disappear as a result of the contact with white civilisation was implausible. When the SLP was founded in July 1876, the newspapers of the country were filled with details of the deaths of George A. Custer and his regiment at Little Bighorn, which had occurred at the end of June of that year. Little Bighorn was just one of the recurrent conflicts that characterised the

[1] "Unsere Indianerbevölkerung," *Volksstimme des Westens*, February 23, 1878.

relations between the federal government and Native American tribes in the 1870s and 1880s. After the Civil War, the United States progressively completed the colonisation of the West and the removal of its original inhabitants. Each president put forward his own approach to the so-called "Indian question," a phrase which indicated problems connected to the armed engagement with Native American tribes, the handling of the problematic relations between white settlers and Native Americans, and the attempts to "civilise" American Indians and favour their integration within white American society. Ultimately, none of these attempts produced lasting results, by the end of the century the Native American population had almost been exterminated and confined to small reservations scattered around the country.[2]

Socialist discussions regarding Native Americans reveal different features when compared to those about Chinese immigrants and African Americans presented in the previous two chapters. Whereas the problem of immigration in California and the future of African Americans were topics comprehensively addressed by socialists, the space in the socialist newspapers dedicated to the "Indian Question" was more limited. English-language socialist papers rarely mentioned the issue, whereas German-language dailies discussed it only occasionally. Additionally, the fact that the SLP did not devote a single line of its official platform or constitution towards the problem of Native Americans may confirm the first impression that socialists were simply not interested in it.

But a deeper analysis of socialist opinions on the "Indian Question" reveals a different situation. SLP members had comprehensive and acute discussions on the position of Native Americans within US society. The shaping of socialist thought on American Indians can be attributed to a number of factors. The first is the peculiar image that German immigrants had of Native Americans, which originated in the early nineteenth century and continued to shape German

[2] The literature on Indian-US relations in the second half of the nineteenth century is extremely vast. See the classic works of Francis P. Prucha and Robert Berkhofer: Francis P. Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Robert E. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); and Fredrick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: the Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984); C. Joseph Genetin Pilawa, *Crooked Paths to Allotment: the Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); other works are mentioned in the following footnotes.

American socialists' investigation of the problems connected with the settlement and integration of Native Americans in the US.[3] Secondly, socialists used the "Indian Question" as a means of exploring new ways to attack the capitalist system. The discussions on Indian policies functioned as proxies for criticism of the model of economic and social development put forward by the American government. The repeated failures of the Indian Department to defend the rights of Native Americans were used by socialists as cases in point to assert the moral and political bankruptcy of the capitalist system. SLP members showed that the annihilation of Native Americans served the bourgeois interests of the American middle class. They reversed the main argument against American Indians – that they were "uncivilised" – and instead focused their attacks on the nominally "civilized," but in reality unequal and exploitative, culture of capitalism itself.

Crucially, socialist discussions on Native Americans signalled a progressive shift in socialist racial thought away from scientific racialism to more comprehensive ways of conceptualising and understanding racial differences grounded on the analysis of social and cultural differences. Most commonly, socialists discussing Native Americans rejected the idea that Indians were inferior from a physical or biological point of view, while at the same time they contended that Native Americans had less developed social and economic structures. In part, this change mirrored shifts happening within the American intellectual scene, where phrenology and other pseudo-scientific approaches were being replaced by newly professionalised social scientific disciplines, such as anthropology.[4] However, within the specifically German American socialist intellectual world this change was complicated by a drive to combine anthropological accounts with Marxist historical materialism. In *Ancient Society*, the pioneering American anthropologist, Lewis H. Morgan, described a hierarchy of human peoples, evaluating their progress according to a Western-centred model of social, cultural, and economic development. Conversely, Marxist historical materialism focused

[3] H. Glenn Penny, *Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
[4] Steven Conn, *History's Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 179.

exclusively on economic production, assessing the progress of a society through the way its production relations worked. While Marx and Engels believed that socialism (i.e. the common ownership of the means of production) was the ultimate stage of human development, for Morgan the "modern civilisation" of white societies, as opposed to the savagery of non-whites, was the highest stage of human evolution. Socialists made attempts to integrate these two mismatching teleological approaches. At times, these attempts were openly framed in racist terms. But, on other occasions, socialists managed to avoid racism and discussed racial differences in a purely historical materialist way, which avoided racialist essentialism and normative judgments of superiority and inferiority on different racial groups. Even if socialist results were far from consistent, they can be analysed to show how American socialists in the 1870s and 1880s came to abandon scientific racialism and moved toward new forms of scientific mechanism that conjugated socialism and modern social science.

The contextual factors mentioned above also help to account for the shortcomings of the opinions expressed in the SLP press. The socialist debate was written for white readers and directed against white enemies. It appropriated Native Americans as nominal protagonists in a wider conversation that was in fact about the economic and political relations between white social classes. In their articles, socialists rarely abandoned their white Anglo-Saxon perspective to consider Native American views. They relied upon Western categories of religion, property, family, economy, etc. In other words, they rarely challenged their own ethnocentrism.

In sum, while explaining how the debate on American Indians fits within the larger discussion on socialism and race at the end of the nineteenth century, this chapter maintains that articles on Native Americans represent a specific way of addressing the problem of racial diversity from a socialist point of view. These articles not only show how socialists formulated original methods to attack capitalism and reject a bourgeois rhetoric of civilisation grounded on capital accumulation. But they also shed light on shifts in socialist ideas of race, which contested the rhetoric of scientific

racialism while conceiving the diversity between whites and Native Americans in terms of cultural and social differences rather than a biological hierarchy between human races.

## Early German understandings of Native Americans

Before mass German immigration to the US began in the 1820s, a strong image of American Indians was already present in German culture. It derived from literature, paintings, and other forms of artistic expression, and it had an enduring impact on German Americans' conception of Native Americans throughout the nineteenth century. According to historian H. Glenn Penny, across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Germans and Native Americans developed a sort of "elective affinity," a reciprocal fascination that created a special connection between the two peoples.[5] The favourable image Germans had of Native Americans came from certain historical circumstances that led these Europeans to identify themselves with American Indians. Penny explains that, in the early nineteenth century, Germans used the literary production of a "triumvirate" of authors (Cornelius Tacitus, Alexander von Humboldt and James Fenimore Cooper) to form their ideas of Native Americans. The fame of Tacitus was clearly connected to the diffusion of the Romantic nationalism of key intellectuals such as Richard Wagner and Johann G. Herder. Tacitus's *Germania* described the German tribes as fierce opponents of the Roman Empire, a representation which worked well to provide the nascent German nation with a glorious history. Crucially, according to Penny, Tacitus's work gave Germans a model to contextualise and understand Native Americans' fight against white invaders.[6]

With regard to Humboldt, Penny stresses that in his highly influential works the German naturalist took a strong stance against the excesses of imperialism and spoke in favour of the Indian cause. He also set a key precedent by personally visiting South America and writing up the results of his explorations in his books. Other German intellectuals followed this example and visited the

[5] Penny, *Kindred by Choice.*
[6] Ibid., 30-39.

US Great Plains in the 1820s and 1830s. In particular, the diary of Maximilian von Wied-Neuwied, *Travels in Inner North America in the Years 1832 to 1834*, illustrated by the Swiss painter Karl Bodmer, codified "the image of the noble plains warrior" and was published in German, French and English from 1839 onwards. Finally, Cooper's novels furnished material to inspire the imagination of German readers. Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, centred on the adventures of the Indian-educated white Natty Bumppo, was the most frequently translated American book in Germany, and its countless reproductions played a key role in popularising the image of Native Americans.[7]

Penny speaks of a "disjuncture of cultural structures" to explain how the favourable image Germans had of Native Americans clashed with the violence experienced by German American settlers on the Far West frontier in the mid-1860s. He mentions the example of a group of socialist members of a *Turner club* who moved from Cincinnati to the colony of New Ulm, Minnesota. Ironically, stresses Penny, socialist German Americans harshly criticised the inefficient and corrupt policy of the US federal government towards Native Americans, without realising that their own presence on Indian lands was a strong cause of dissatisfaction for the local Indian tribes. Penny describes how, after the tensions turned into a violent war between the Dakotas and white settlers, German immigrants silenced their criticisms of the federal government and realigned their position along racial lines.[8]

Articles written for socialist papers in the 1860s further reveal the "disjunction of cultural structures" described by Penny. In 1869 and 1870 the socialist-leaning *Arbeiter Union* (which from September 1869 was edited by the future SLP leader Adolph Douai) published two articles that closely investigated the federal approach towards Native Americans.[9] These articles show how, once immersed in the American political culture, Native Americans rapidly slipped away from Romantic imagery and became merely a source of administrative problems in the eyes of German

[7] Ibid., 40-48; infra, chap. 2.
[8] Penny, *Kindred By Choice*, 69-95.
[9] On the *Arbeiter Union*, cf. Stan Nadel, *The German Immigrant Left in the United States*, in *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, eds. Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 53-54; Justine Davis Randers-Pehrson, *Adolf Douai, 1819-1888: the Turbulent Life of a German Forty-Eighter in the Homeland and in the United States* (New York; Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000), 289; infra, chapter 1.

immigrants. The first article published in the *Arbeiter Union*, titled *Die Indianer Frage* ("The Indian Question"), criticised the treaty system used by the US government in their dealings with Native Americans, arguing that:

> The [present] system is fundamentally wrong because it gives Indians sustainment without work, encourages them in their laziness, and is culture-adverse. The example of the Six Nations in upstate New York and the Massachusetts Indians, who learnt to practice agriculture, animal husbandry and trade, just like the whites, shows that Indians can and want to work, if they have no alternative but to fully abandon their wild habits and become useful citizens.[10]

The *Arbeiter Union* detailed what it saw as the flaws of the federal policy: the US considered each tribe as nations such as France or the U.K. This, suggested the article, created a paradoxical situation, where only a few designated persons were entitled to trade with the Indian peoples, a situation that encouraged corruption and favoured the private interests of a small number of traders. Furthermore, added the article, the treaty system was contradictory, because even if an Indian tribe complained about some wrongdoing on the part of US agents, it could not go to a third party to seek justice (as in a normal situation regulated by International Law), but it was forced to appeal to the US government itself. The article concluded by suggesting an immediate change of approach. The federal government should provide Indians with "farm implements, animals, seeds, seedlings and rewards on the ground of civilisation; and food until the next harvest." Furthermore, it should declare the international treaties with them null and void and "give the Indians full civil rights as individuals under the ordinary civil jurisdiction."[11]

Six months later, the daily published a new piece on the problems caused by the Plain Indian tribes, nomadic groups that lived in the areas between the Dakotas and Missouri. The article

[10] "Die Indianerfrage," *Arbeiter Union*, June 27, 1869.
[11] Ibid.

attacked the ineffective policy of the federal government even more vehemently, stressing that "this handful of wilds costs us a few million a year on annuities … the maintenance of at least two thirds of our standing army, which is around 20 million, plus other expenses every now and then if an Indian war begins." On top of these expenses, continued the article, there were the "hundreds of lives and millions of stolen property that fall victim to these savages. This is what the wild Indians cost to us."[12] The way to stop the wastage of federal money criticised in the article was to guarantee each Indian an allotment of arable land. The article specified the size of the allotment each individual should receive (40 acres), adding that all the tribes should be concentrated into one single territory ("an area to watch as big as one of our smaller states") and that their only contact with whites should be with teachers and "friends of the civilisation of red-skins."[13]

The *Arbeiter Union* articles were a mixture of contradictory messages. On the one hand, they rested on the implicit premise that American Indians had no innate biological or cultural limitations that prevented them from joining white society, and that it was a failure on the part of the federal government that they still practised their "wild" habits. This approach was an enlightened one for a period in which calls for the extermination of Native Americans were far from absent in public opinion. On the other hand, the use of terms and phrases such as "civilisation," "laziness," "wild habits," and "become *useful* citizens" in the first article, or the undisguised disdain with which the journalist described the Plain Indians as a mere waste of public money in the second article corroborate the impression that the socialists writing for the *Arbeiter Union* held a perspective based on a hierarchical understanding of human development which put white civilisation at the top of the scale and Native Americancivilisation far below it. The idea of reuniting all the American Indians within a single area of the country and forcing them to become farmers (with the implicit threat of starving them to death, if they were not willing to abide by this system) was naïve at best. It considerably underestimated the logistical and cultural problems connected to the peculiar situation of Native American enclaves within the country. The group usually defined as "Plain

[12] "Die Indianer-Politik," *Arbeiter Union*, March 14, 1870.
[13] Ibid.

Indians" was made up of several different tribes, jealous of their own independence and strongly attached to their homelands and to their cultural habits. Assimilation through allotment was not a feasible option, at least in the short and simplistic terms suggested by the *Arbeiter Union* articles.[14]

The articles in the German American paper pointed to some key aspects of the debate on Native Americans of the time. As reconstructed by historian Francis P. Prucha, Ulysses Grant, who took office in 1869, dedicated his two Presidential mandates to creating a new Indian policy that abandoned the broken model of international treaties, as suggested by the *Arbeiter Union*, and reduced the wars on the frontier with American Indian tribes.[15] Grant's approach was grounded on two pillars: pacification and the education of Native Americans. However, these theoretical commitments did not always work in practice. This period saw the creation of reservations, commonly administered by Indian agents nominated by religious organisations. Unfortunately, the presence of zealous Methodist or Orthodox Friend agents did not reduce the problem of endemic corruption within the Indian Department. In some cases, the ingenuity of the newly appointed agents worsened the situation. Furthermore, the new system, despite its commitment to pacification, relied on the use of the Army to stop those Indians who did not comply with the new reservation policy. Therefore, the period of the so-called "peace policy" was actually characterised by the continuation of armed engagements on the frontier, a guerrilla-style confrontation that continued well into the 1880s.[16]

Socialists writing in the *Arbeiter Union* and the Christian philanthropists who inspired Grant's reforms shared some elements in their analyses of the "Indian Question." Both wanted to save the Indians from extermination, and both believed that the only alternative for them was civilisation. Where they disagreed was in the policy required to achieve this aim. Grant's

[14] On the situation of Plain Indians in these years, cf. William T. Hagan, *How the West Was Lost*, in *Indians in American History: An Introduction*, eds. Fredrick E. Hoxie and Peter Iverson (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1998), 157-161.
[15] Prucha, *The Great Father*, 152-180.
[16] Ibid.; cf. also Edmund J. Danziger Jr., "Native American Resistance and Accommodation During the Late Nineteenth Century," in *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 167-186.

philanthropists were motivated by the desire to educate Native Americans to Christian precepts, and the policy of reservations fitted in well with this intention. To have Native Americans organised within neatly defined areas of land, under the direct control of one single person, was the ideal situation if they wanted to weaken tribal social organisation and promote new values and cultural systems. Tellingly, this policy went together with educational programmes for Native American children, which included the relocation of young tribe members in the East and their formation according to "moral" and "civilised" standards of behaviour.[17]

Conversely, socialists focused on what was, for the time, the progressive, if simplistically formulated, policy of allotment – a strategy that the federal Government would ultimately embrace in the 1880s. At the heart of this difference was a fundamental contrast in the philosophies adopted by Christian philanthropists on the one hand and socialists on the other. The former believed that change should be imposed on Native Americans through social and moral re-education; socialists, meanwhile, held that the change of Native American economic structures from hunting to farming would be decisive. The priority accorded to the economy was a consequence of socialists' historical materialist approach. They believed that if American Indians changed their systems of goods production, "acculturation" according to Western standards would naturally follow. It is possible to conclude, then, that in the early 1870s socialist German Americans had opinions that were in line with the mainstream progressive camp, even if they did not hesitate to put forward original solutions that fit in better with their theoretical commitments.

[17] On the programmes for the education of American Indians, cf. Michael C. Coleman, *American Indian Children at School* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993); David Wallace Adams, *Education For Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Jacqueline Fear-Segal, *White Man's Club: Schools, Race, and the Struggle of Indian Acculturation* (Lincoln: London; University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

## The SLP in the 1870s: the German American community and the attack on capitalism

By the end of the decade, when socialists began again to discuss the problems of Indian integration and settlement, the American political scenario was quite different. The President who succeeded Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, had to face up to the failure of the policy of reservations, which had not delivered the desired results of integration and a reduction of armed conflicts. Furthermore, Hayes had to find ways to stop the corruption of the Indian Department, which was devouring enormous amounts of public funds without yielding any significant results.[18] All of the most important German-language socialist newspapers of the time, such as the *Chicagoer Vorbote* and the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, published articles on these topics. However, the "Indian Question" was addressed with particular persistence in one newspaper, the *Volksstimme des Westens*. The reasons for this interest lay in certain historical circumstances. The first is self-evident: the *Volksstimme* was the only socialist newspaper based in a frontier city, St. Louis, a place reasonably close to areas that were regularly affected by conflicts between white settlers and Native Americans. The second reason involves dynamics internal to the Midwestern German American community. The period of activity of the socialist daily (1878-1881) coincided precisely with Carl Schurz's term of office as Secretary of Interior. Schurz, before being nominated in his cabinet by Hayes, was a Senator elected in the State of Missouri. He was a stakeholder of the *Westliche Post*, one of the most popular Republican dailies of St. Louis, and a prominent figure in the area. Even more importantly, he was arguably the most famous German American politician to come out of the generation of immigrant Forty-Eighters.[19] As thoroughly documented by Bruce Levine, and detailed in the first chapter of this work, socialists and liberals stood side by side both in Germany in the anti-establishment turmoil of 1848-49 and in the US in the anti-slavery movement before the Civil War. In the 1870s, these German American groups not only shared a cultural background, but they

[18] Prucha, *The Great Father*, 183-193. Cf. also Paul Stuart, *The Indian Office: Growth and Development of an American Institution* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1979).
[19] Hans L. Trefousse, *Carl Schurz: a Biography* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

also sought votes in the same immigrant communities, even if, according to American political categories, they stood in political movements separated by profound historical and theoretical differences.[20]

As Secretary of the Interior, Schurz was also in charge of the Indian Office. During his term, he tried to solve the problem of corruption and bring some efficiency and accountability to this unit of the federal government. Schurz's efforts with regard to this particular aspect of his political actions were summarised in an article that Schurz wrote for the *North American Review* in July 1881, some months after he had stopped serving in Hayes's cabinet. This comprehensively described the evolution of federal policy from the administration of Grant and represents a critical source of comparison to examine socialists' opinions at the time. Schurz's opening was honest and blunt:

> That the history of our Indian relations presents, in great part, a record of broken treaties, of unjust wars, and of cruel spoliation, is a fact too well known to require proof or to suffer denial.[21]

The Republican politician subjected the behaviour of white settlers to harsh criticism, arguing that "it is also a fact that most of the Indian wars grew, not from any desire of the Government to disturb the Indians on the territorial possession guaranteed to them, but from the restless and unscrupulous greed of frontiersmen."[22] The key problem, maintained Schurz, was that the federal government was completely unable to modify this situation. "The Government is, indeed, strong in some respects, but weak in others." According to the former Secretary of the Interior, Washington was constantly trapped between its determination to honour the contracts signed with Indian tribes and

[20] Bruce Levine, *The Spirit of 1848: German Immigrants, Labor Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); infra, chap. 1.
[21] Carl Schurz, "Present aspects of the Indian problem," *North American Review* 258, no. 4, Special Heritage Issue: the Indian question, 1823-1873 (1881; repr. Winter, 1973), 45.
[22] Ibid.

the pressure of the unstoppable force of colonisation. In a key section, Schurz argued that even if the Government decided to actively take the side of Indians, the situation would only degenerate into violence and, "in spite of all its good intentions and its sense of justice, the forces of the Government will find themselves engaged on the side of the white man. The Indians will be hunted down at whatever cost."[23] Schurz took as inevitable the fact that race solidarity came well before justice and "good intentions." The government, in his opinion, was powerless to stop this course of events. Schurz omitted another element, which surely was at the back of his mind when writing these lines: to take the perspective of Native Americans was simply untenable in terms of public consensus. Had the Republican Party backed Native Americans, they would have lost the coming elections.

Having depicted the situation in these terms, it was easy for Schurz to conclude that the choice for Native Americans was hard but inevitable: either civilisation or extermination. Provided that the latter "must be revolting to every American who is not devoid of all sentiments of justice and humanity," Schurz suggested three things that should be pursued in order to help civilise Native Americans. Firstly, that they be taught to work by "making work profitable and attractive to them." Secondly, that "they be educated, especially the youth of both sexes." Finally, that they be granted individual land allotments from their lands, and that the remaining land be assigned to whites with the profits going into Indian hands.[24]

Schurz expounded a carefully crafted argument, which described a situation in which there was no possible alternative approach but the one adopted by the Indian Department, namely a process of civilising Native Americans based on the three guidelines sketched above. He played the role of the disinterested and realist politician, who analysed the situation rationally and without any ideological commitment. Schurz's article made clear a shift in the official position of the federal government, whose pro-civilisation stance was no longer based on religious and philanthropic arguments but grounded merely on strategic realism. But for socialists the model of civilisation

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid, 48.

suggested by politicians like Schurz was far from objective, it was actually a pure extension of capitalist commitment. While highly cultured and progressive-minded, Schurz was promoting an individual work ethic and ideas of private property that were, in essence, bourgeois. Therefore, to attack the Indian policy put forward by Schurz was a means to question the development model offered by the United States of America. In their critiques of the Indian-American relations, socialists shaped their anti-capitalist message and attempted to figure out how the issue could be solved differently from the government's plans.

August Otto-Walster, the editor of the *Volksstimme des Westens*, was behind many of the most violent attacks on Schurz. A graduate in history and economics at the University of Leipzig and a former leader of the SDAP, where he cooperated with August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, he was a well-established member of the German American community of St. Louis, with a recent past of political activity in Germany and the right profile to attempt to erode the consensus of Republicans in favour of the socialist SLP.[25] Attacks formulated in the socialist press focused on three main themes: the corruption of public authorities and the abuse of public goods by private entrepreneurs; the Indian policy as a means to further the economic interests of the capitalist class; and the aggressiveness of white settlers. Yet socialists almost exclusively focused on "their" side of the problem – that is, they rarely tried to investigate the point of view of Native Americans or to understand Indians' role in the events analysed.

Otto-Walster's focus on public corruption in the Indian Office was far from an original move. Corruption was widespread in several public sectors during the Gilded Age, but this issue particularly affected the Indian Department, as a result of its large budget and loose mechanisms of control. An article in June 1878, titled "The rascal economy in the Indian Department," explained how agents regularly cheated Indians and how the inefficiency of the Department had wasted an enormous amount of federal money and resources. The article spared no details about the

[25] Harmut Keil, *A Profile of Editors of the German-American Radical Press, 1850-1910*, in *The German-American Radical Press: the Shaping of a Left Political Culture, 1850-1940*, eds. Elliot Shore, Ken Fones-Wolf, and James P. Danky (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 19.

mechanisms used by Indian agents to neutralise the anti-corruption measures of the Indian Department. Agents relied upon the ignorance of Native American chiefs and asked them to sign lists of goods with altered quantities, in order to keep for themselves a part of the consignment. The article also recalled one of the most famous episodes of these years, the death of Custer and the destruction of the US Cavalry Regiment at Little Bighorn in 1876:

> If one considers the whole list of fraud, theft, robbery and abuse that have come out so far in one single examination, then one is almost sick at the thought of the revelations that lie ahead. If the causes of the Sioux Wars, where Custer and many young brave men fell down, are investigated, which atrocities will come to light first?[26]

This *Volksstimme* journalist wanted to exploit the episode of Little Bighorn in order to reinforce his critique of the Indian Department. Socialists used any means available to expose and challenge the underpinnings of US Indian policy, as represented by the liberal bourgeois politics of the likes of Carl Schurz.[27]

The *Volksstimme* also provided clear examples of the second theme mentioned – the abuse of the Indian policy as a means to further the economic interests of the capitalist middle class. In a column written in May 1878, Otto-Walster linked the issue of Native Americans to the dynamics of class and exploitation. The German American editor targeted the bourgeois newspapers of the Mid-Western area, such as the *Westliche Post* and the *Chicago Freie Presse*, where Indians were described as idle beggars who relied on the help of the federal government to survive. "The poor Indians are quite unlucky not to have conceived of and adopted the European culture and justice before. Had their native lands assured to themselves as legitimate landlords, how nicely they could

[26] "Die Spitzbubenwirtschaft im Indianer Department," *Volksstimme des Westens*, June 6, 1878.
[27] For other attacks on the Indian Department and Carl Schurz in the socialist press, cf.: "Die Ursache der Indianer-Kriege," *Volksstimme des Westens*, November 14, 1878; "Wie die Indianer beraubt und betrogen worden," *Volksstimme des Westens*, July 24, 1878; "Ansichten des Tochters eines Indianer-Agenten über Indianer," *Chicagoer Vorbote*, October 25, 1879; "Indianisches," *Wochenblatt des Newyorker Volkszeitung*, April 3, 1880.

live off their interests now, rather than being driven as homeless from place to place and deprived of one right after another."[28] This German American journalist, with an ironic and biting tone, pointed to the contradiction of those middle class reformists who on the one hand defended the "holiness" of private property and on the other did not recognise the property of the original inhabitants of the American continent. "You fool Indian, why did you not hire pettifogging lawyers to arrange your real estate, or why did not you defend with your own life every inch of ground against those robbers who steal today where and what they can, instead of allowing [them] to deport you eternally westward with smooth words and contracts full of broken promises?"[29] In the words of Otto-Walster, the apparently industrious middle class became the real beggar, because its affluence and welfare were defended by a biased judiciary system, ready to oust the first proprietors of US land and guarantee itself an easy means of survival. His piece suggested that the white model was apparently based on procedural justice, but in reality it always privileged the economic interests of the wealthy classes. In this article Otto-Walster seemed to introduce a new line of argument, which suggested that there was no "Indian Question" here, but rather a "White Question" instead. In other words, the problem was not that Native Americans were not civilised, but that the "civilisation" recommended by whites was unsuitable. The aggressiveness of white capitalists made evident the inhumane nature of the capitalist system of development.

The same topic – the inhumanity of capitalism – was at the centre of the third theme regularly debated by socialists, namely the avidity of white settlers. Here, socialist journalists lifted the weight of responsibility for the conflicts at the borders from the shoulders of Native Americans and placed it on white settlers. Not only that, but following Otto-Walster's argument, as outlined above, socialists challenged the idea that "civilisation", as presented by the federal government, could be a positive achievement for the Native Americans at all. By contesting federal policies, socialists eventually rejected the dominant cultural imperialism of white assimilationists.

[28] "Die armen Indianer", *Volksstimme des Westens*, May 10, 1878.
[29] Ibid.

This argument was introduced in several articles with different nuances. The *New Yorker Volkszeitung* had a weekly column entitled *Indianer Wirren* ("Indian troubles"), where it gave regular updates on the situation at the frontier. In 1882 the New York-based paper commented on the delicate events on the South-western border in these terms:

> Dreadful are the atrocities that are perpetrated by the Apaches and Chiricahua abutted in Arizona and New Mexico. Very understandable the violent open letter that a mass meeting in Tucson has directed to the US President! …. But one should not forget how the outbreak of the American Indian anger came into existence.[30]

One year before, continued the article, some precious charcoal was discovered within the borders of the Indian reservation. Since then, whites had tried all legal and illegal means possible to invade the territory, and the reservation had been repeatedly reduced in size. The article commented on the reaction of Indians in this way: "Is it any wonder if the wild original owners of the land lost patience and seized their arms?"[31] It was by using their understanding of economic dynamics that socialists built their pro-Native American stance. SLP members fiercely rejected the logic of economic interest that drove white settlers.

But by simply stressing the avid aggression of white settlers, socialists were not saying anything different from what Schurz had argued in his article on the "Indian Question." The inability to control colonialism was a problem well known to the federal government. Socialists did more than that: they took white colonialism as a symbol of the problems of the capitalist economic system, suggesting that its social consequences were so devastating that they were making whites inhumane. In August 1878 the *Volksstimme* reported the story of a Native scout and interpreter for the US Army, whose daughter was kidnapped by a Nez Perce tribe. He travelled deep into the Indian territory, found her in the camp of Sitting Bull, and brought her back unharmed. "They [the

[30] "Der neueste Indianerkrieg," *Wochenblatt des New Yorker Volkszeitung*, May 13, 1882.
[31] Ibid.

Indians] looked after them even without knowing the teachings of the 'Christian civilisation'."[32] The problem, continued the article, started when the two Native Americans passed the "white borders." They were attacked and severely wounded by white settlers, and the woman was raped before the eyes of her father. "This is the way in which the man was rewarded for being a loyal friend of the whites and the government … Is it any wonder why such civilisation aspirations are not that understandable to Indians?" This final passage, which recalled almost word for word the point made in the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*, captures the reason why socialist activists contested the logic of "civilisation" put forward by the federal government. White settlers' behaviour revealed them, and not their Native American victims, as "savages," and so the essentialist racial and cultural hierarchies were turned upside down.

A very similar argument was put forward in another article titled "Die Zivilisierung der Indianer" ("The civilisation of Indians") published in 1885 in the *Sozialist*, the official German-language newspaper of the SLP. The discussion was triggered by a declaration made in Congress by Kansas Senator John James Ingalls, who justified the disappearance of an Indian reservation in Oklahoma by arguing that "we [the Americans] belong to a rapacious and conquest-loving race." The socialist journalist went through the entire history of American-Native relations, in order to make the point that in dealing with Native Americans whites were always blinded by economic interest and innate prejudice. Referring to the early European settlers, the journalist stated that "even those industrious and persevering colonists, even those that religious intolerance had driven here, treated the Indians like wild beasts that destroyed their arable crop and that either will be eradicated or must be driven away from the settlements in distant wildernesses where the white 'culture carriers' will not be in the way." Discussing the present situation, the socialist journalist said that the federal government could keep changing policies – giving Indians the means for subsistence, paying officials and granting funds to force them into civilisation, approving laws for their uplift – but these would be "futile efforts, as long as there are capitalists, that can bribe

[32] "Wie man Indianer civilisiert," *Volksstimme des Westens*, August 23, 1878.

officials and chiefs and can cheat the law with impunity." Once again, in this article racialist essentialism overlapped with anti-capitalism. The socialist writer ultimately embraced Ingalls's argument that Americans had an innate and natural tendency to be "rapacious and conquest-loving," only to reject this tendency as the poisoned result of US capitalism. Thus far, Americans had been a race constitutionally prone to greediness. As long as this continued, the relationship with Native Americans would never change.[33]

In his essay in the *North American Review*, Schurz wrote that the alternative for Native Americans was either extermination or civilisation. The conclusion of the *Sozialist* seemed to directly respond to the dichotomy put forward by the Republican politician: "The utter extermination is the tendency of the civilisation method that has been practiced on the original inhabitants of this land."[34] Schulz's dichotomy was a false alternative, because capitalist civilisation meant, by its very operation, the obliteration of Native Americans.

## The historical materialist alternative to capitalist civilisation

The cases presented so far have shown how the rejection of federal Indian policy led socialists to contest the dominant assimilationist framework and, at times, to invert the appeal to "civilise" Native Americans into denunciation of the uncivilised nature of the capitalist economic system. However, in some cases, the clearest of which came in the articles of the *Arbeiter Union* analysed in the first section, this narrative went hand in hand with the additional belief that whites belonged to a culturally superior society, whose aim was to civilise Native Americans. In other words, socialists at the same time rejected the self-representation of capitalism as "civilisation" and maintained that Native Americans were less "civilised" than whites.

What might look to be as a contradiction at first sight finds explanation in the laborious way in which socialists formed their ideas on Native Americans. This section sets debates on the Indian

[33] "Die Zivilisierung der Indianer," *Sozialist*, July 18, 1885.
[34] Ibid.

policy aside in order to focus on those pieces that more clearly defined the theoretical foundations of the socialist point of view. It suggests that the contradictions within the articles written by socialists arose from their adhesion to multiple and conflicting theoretical approaches. Socialists negotiated their way between at least three stances: racialist scientism, socialist historical materialism and anthropological social evolutionism. The last two approaches were strongly present in socialist writings of the period. This section will argue that German American socialists, not unlike Marx and especially Engels on the other side of the Atlantic, managed to fuse these two approaches. They did this by integrating social evolutionism into socialist teleology, creating a single hierarchy of evolution based on social, cultural and economic advancement. In this way, they could both defend the racist premise that Native Americans were culturally and socially behind whites, and at the same time attack capitalism as a corrupted stage of evolution that would be left behind with the advent of socialism.

An article published in the *Chicagoer Vorbote* in 1882 adequately explains the intertwining of different approaches in the analyses of the "Indian Question." The piece was written to reject the widespread idea that Native Americans did not have the same "civilisation skills" (*Zivilisationsfähigkeit*) as whites. In order to prove the point, the anonymous socialist who wrote the piece had to confute the pseudo-scientific arguments of intellectuals like Josiah Nott, who had argued that the inferiority of Native Americans was physiologically determined. The opening sentence of the piece went straight to the point: "From the scientific point of view the question of the civilisation skills of Indians is judged differently than what can be done from the standpoint of philanthropy."[35] The socialist was not interested in contesting the scientific results of Josiah Nott's experiments; however, he rejected the premise that physiology could be a standard to judge "civilisation" by suggesting that even if Nott had determined that "Caucasians" had a bigger skull size than Native Americans, he did not define the "skull size threshold" required to develop a "civilised" society. The socialist writer further argued that civilisation flourished only in response to

[35] "Über die Zivilisationsfähigkeit der Indianer," *Chicagoer Vorbote*, March 4, 1882.

need: lack of food, lack of space and so one forced people to develop new and more efficient means of production. American Indians, continued the socialist, had lived amidst an abundance of natural resources and therefore never felt the need to change their ways of living. The socialist added historical considerations to back up his argument: the past glory of pre-Colombian populations confirmed that, in the right circumstances, Native American peoples could rise to the higher stages of civilisation. Conversely, not only had white invaders destroyed these glorious civilisations but they had also suffocated more recent attempts to develop independent Native American societies, for example with the removal of the Cherokees endorsed by President Andrew Jackson in the 1830s. If Native Americans still practised their wild habits, then, it was not because of their physical or natural backwardness, but because whites never gave them the chance to evolve to a higher stage of civilisation.[36]

This article presents two points of interest. Firstly, it shows ways in which socialists manage to remove the theoretical constraints imposed by scientific racialism. Although the *Vorbote* journalist did not have the intellectual credentials or the skills to dismiss them, he found a flaw in Nott's argument and managed to circumvent it, moving the analysis from the biological to the socio-economic field, an area where he could more confidently ground his egalitarian point of view. The second element of interest lies in the implicit premise of the socialist's argument. It is self-evident that, in order to assess the "civilisation skills" of Native Americans, the journalist started with a pre-established idea of what was "civilised" and what was "savage" – an idea evidently assumed to be shared by the reader too. The fact that Native Americans, with their tribal society and their economy founded on nomadic hunting, were at a lower level of development than whites was never questioned or problematised. This particular combination of claims manifested a core tension in socialists' conceptions of Native Americans as a supposed racial group: while they were not seen as biologically inferior to whites, they were understood to be socially and culturally inferior. Combining these two claims was not a direct contradiction, but it did convey the resonance of racial

[36] Ibid.

prejudices not only in biological and scientific, but also social and political discourses. The rejection of scientific racialism was not an attempt to defend full equality between whites and Native Americans but rather to explain the reasons for Indian inferiority on a different basis. SLP members rejected the existence of a biologically defined hierarchy of men, but were at ease with the idea of a culturally and socially defined scale of evolution. In other words, socialists dismissed the open biological racism of mid-nineteenth century naturalists like Nott, but embraced a point of view that was ethnocentric in that it placed white Anglo-Saxon culture in a primary position on the scale of social evolution.

This position was certainly not only being defended by socialists. Indeed, it is possible to identify a striking similarity – both in terms of virtues and limits – between the opinions of this socialist and the tenets of an arising discipline, which in the 1870s was gaining more and more recognition in American intellectual circles: anthropology. The success of anthropology in the US was in part due to Lewis H. Morgan. Morgan was a lawyer from the state of New York, who early in his life developed a strong interest in anthropological research and started to gather first-hand evidence from the Seneca, a nation belonging to the Iroquois tribe. Focusing on systems of kinship, Morgan built up his theory of social evolution during his career as a scholar spanning three decades – a theory that he fully explained in the 1877 publication *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism and Civilisation*. Morgan's works were canonical for the first generation of American anthropologists. He elaborated a system that divided the process of human evolution into three main stages – savagery, barbarism and civilisation, the first two stages being further divided into lower, middle and upper. Morgan's categories were carefully constructed according to a series of principles, which included kinship and family systems, technology, institutions of government, property and economic development.[37] Morgan's theory was widely appreciated because, compared to those of self-made naturalists and

[37] Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism and Civilisation* (1877; repr. New York: Henry Holt, 1907); Daniel Noah Moses, *The Promise of Progress: the Life and Work of Lewis Henry Morgan* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009); Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, 53; Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, 14-21; Conn, *History's Shadow*, 139.

scholars of the time, it rested on what looked like a more solid fieldwork and scientific analysis of primary evidence. Moreover, it went beyond mere physical measurements, incorporating a logical system of thought and cultural, social and economic elements. In the words of Steven Conn, "Morgan's theories married developments in geology, palaeontology, and Darwinian evolution to human culture, and made the development of culture a natural process embracing the whole family of man."[38]

To some extent, then, Morgan's anthropology did what the socialist author attempted, in less developed terms, in the *Vorbote* article – to replace scientific racialism with a theory based on considerations of social, economic and cultural development. This similarity is no mere coincidence; on the contrary, it explains a change in the intellectual history of the late 1870s, which was abandoning phrenology and scientific racialism and moving towards explanations that combined Darwinism as well as social and economic aspects. SLP members were not the only socialists turning to anthropology to discuss human differences. Karl Marx made a similar move, having received a copy of Morgan's *Ancient Society* in 1879 and dedicating the last years of his life to closely reading and glossing it, together with other works of anthropology such as John Budd Phear's *The Aryan Village*, Henry Sumner Maine's *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* and John Lubbock's *The Origin of Civilisation*. Marx's notes were at the basis of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* published by Engels in 1884. This short book systematised Marx's reflections on Morgan's work into a coherent form, conferring on the American anthropologist a "strange posthumous career" amongst Marxist thinkers, as Morgan's biographer Daniel Noah Moses wrote.[39] The late publication of Marx's notebooks, collected and edited by Lawrence Krader in 1971, revealed that Engels's book only partially reproduced the complexity of

[38] Conn, *History's Shadow*, 179.
[39] Moses, *The Promise of Progress*, 278.

Marx's ideas, and actually favoured a mechanist interpretation of Morgan which fitted better with Engels's own understanding of *Ancient Society* than with Marx's thought.[40]

Franklin Rosemont, in one of the few historiographical discussions dedicated to Marx's late thoughts on anthropology, has tried to understand why, by the end of his life, the German philosopher dedicated so much time to reading anthropological works, and especially why he privileged Morgan's. According to Rosemont, "it was not mere 'anthropology' … that Marx found so appealing in Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society* but rather … the merciless critique and condemnation of capitalist civilisation that so well complements that of Charles Fourier … *Ancient Society*, and especially its detailed account of the Iroquois, for the first time gave Marx insights into the concrete *possibilities* of a free society *as it had actually existed in history.*"[41] Morgan, in other words, with the impressive quantity of new information he was making available about what Marx and Engels would call "primitive communism," gave Marx much food for thought about what a future communist society could look like.

In sum, according to Rosemont, Marx saw in Morgan's theory not only alternative examples of development, but real models, existing in history, which could work better than contemporary capitalism. A second generation of anthropologists led by Franz Boas would strongly criticise Morgan's works for its implicit ethnocentrism. Despite the richness of his data, Boas and others would argue, Morgan had designed a mono-linear scale of progress, which misrepresented the diversity of human groups and ultimately put whites at the top of human evolution. Marx did not see things this way. Rather, he stressed the points in which Morgan's teleological schema contradicted itself and revealed the progress of allegedly "primitive" societies – societies which he saw as essentially superior, "in human terms, to the degraded civilisation founded on the fetishism

[40] *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx (Studies of Morgan, Phear, Maine, Lubbock)*, ed. Lawrence Krader (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972); Franklin Rosemont, "Karl Marx and the Iroquois," *libcom.org*. Accessed June 23, 2015 https://libcom.org/library/karl-marx-iroquois-franklin-rosemont.

[41] Rosemont, "Karl Marx and the Iroquois" (emphasis in the original); for other discussions of Marx's notebooks and Morgan, cf. Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 199-208; Moses, *The Promise of Progress*, 278-282.

of commodities," as Rosemont put it. As a result, Marx saw Morgan's work as a powerful scientific tool against those who wanted to connect the idea of progress with that of capitalism.[42]

For mere chronological and practical reasons, socialists in the United States cannot have been directly influenced by Marx's opinions on Morgan, since these were made available to the general public only in 1971. It is more plausible that early on they became familiar with Engels's *The Origin of the Family*, published in 1884 in Zurich and rapidly disseminated within German-speaking socialist circles. The popularity of Morgan's theories was later increased by Daniel De Leon, the leader of the SLP from 1891 onwards. De Leon was a fervent admirer of the American anthropologist and considered *Ancient Society* a classic of the socialist literature.[43] Engels systematically interpreted the relations between historical materialism and anthropology, and utilised a markedly historicist approach to settle the contradictions between two apparently opposed interpretative methods. The German philosopher systematised Morgan's phases of evolution within a materialist conception of history, creating links between stages of social development, as described by Morgan, and phases of economic evolution, as described by Marx's historical materialism. Using Marxian terminology, Engels used the work of Morgan – or more precisely, Marx's notes on Morgan's work – to explain the mechanisms of evolution of the superstructure, thereby filling a key gap within the historical materialist system of thought.[44] However, the influence of Engels's work on the writings of SLP members should not be overestimated, primarily because many of them wrote on the topic either before or immediately after 1884. Nevertheless, to use the works of the two founding fathers of scientific communism as a source of comparison makes it possible to contextualise the reflections of German American socialists within a broader

[42] Rosemont, "Karl Marx and the Iroquois"; Moses, *The Promise of Progress*, 281. On Franz Boas and the debate on Morgan's ethnocentrism, cf. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*, 62-64; Maria Baghramian and Adam Carter, "Relativism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. Accessed September 10, 2015, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/relativism/.
[43] Moses, *The Promise of Progress,* 280-283; Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States. Remapping the History of the American Left*, (London: Verso, 1987), 55.
[44] Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State: in the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972).

discussion on socialism and racial diversity taking place not only in the peripheral German American community, but also in the core of the international socialist world in Europe.

In approaching the articles written in SLP newspapers, then, one may wonder if socialists followed the lead of Marx in recovering and celebrating advanced social models from allegedly primitive civilisations, or if, conversely, they embraced Morgan's ethnocentric point of view. An article published in 1882 in the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* gives a good example of the first approach. The piece discussed Indian policy in 1882, after Samuel J. Kirkwood replaced Carl Schurz as Secretary of the Interior. Amongst other things, the author of the article contested the idea defended by the Indian Department of abandoning the practice of assigning common land in order to help civilise Native Americans. The socialist journalist contended that the reservations tended to house the most prosperous Indians and that, from a legal point of view, a system based on common lands worked better than one based on private lands. Historical materialism was at the root of this writer's pro-common land stance: "So why replace a better system with a worse one, which probably won't survive the end of the current century anywhere in the civilised world anyway?" In this specific case, historical materialism was overtaking anthropological evolutionism, leading the *Volkszeitung* writer to make a point similar to Marx's: Native Americans already used a social practice that was more advanced than the one in use in capitalist society. They had already achieved the future stage of human development, so why should the federal government drag them back to individualism?[45]

But in other cases things went differently and anthropology was used to underpin the conviction that Native Americans were inferior to whites. In 1884, the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* commented on the actions of General George Crook, who in the 1880s was leading the campaign against the Apaches in Arizona. Crook had years of experience in dealing with Native Americans, having fought against the Snake Indians in the 1864-68 Indian Wars and the Sioux in the Great Sioux Wars of 1876-77. The socialist newspaper clearly showed its admiration for the American

[45] "Indianer Politik," *Wochenblatt des New Yorker Volkszeitung*, January 28, 1882.

serviceman, who was renowned for treating Indians fairly and justly.[46] The socialist article endorsed the general's proposal not to give lands to Indians on a tribal base, but to grant only individual allotments. The argument put forward to defend this policy ran as follows:

> The Indian communism looks like that of the ancient people – it needs to go through a preliminary stage of private property, to fork out the earthy inertia, the lack of independence and the tribal ferocity, and later to be allowed to upgrade to the higher level of the scientific communism anticipated by the whites.[47]

The journalist straightforwardly posited scientific communism as a future stage of human development, confirming his adhesion to Marxian historical materialism. What is significant here is that scientific communism was given a racial connotation and became the evolutionary stage of "whites." Anthropology was used to classify "Indian communism," whose positive aspects could be regained only when a passage through private property had freed it of its savagery. Scientific communism, then, was not only the future stage of human development in a historical materialist sense, but it was also the pinnacle of the evolutionary scale from an anthropological point of view. This implied that at the moment only whites, namely those who had live in advanced industrial economies, could access the ultimate level of evolution which came after capitalism. Native Americans, conversely, had to go through the entire process of "evolution."

Whereas the last article commented on unveils white supremacist attitudes in socialist thought, other pieces point to radically different conclusions. An article published in 1884 in the *Sozialist* clearly shows the tension between abiding by the scientific laws of anthropology, which demonstrated the inferiority of Native Americans, and staying with the progressive will of preserving human diversity. The issue at stake, once again, was whether the allotment of lands to

[46] James T. King, "George Crook Indian fighter and humanitarian," *Arizona and the West* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1967), 333-348.
[47] "Zur Indianerfrage," *Wochenblatt des New Yorker* Volkszeitung, October 4, 1884.

individuals instead of tribes could be a good measure of Indians' level of civilisation. The article gave a fair description of the doubts President Cleveland and Secretary of Interior Lucius Lamar had over this issue, providing a critical assessment of them at a later stage. The socialist journalist attacked Lamar's belief that Christianisation was a key element in advancing the process of Indian integration, recalling the failures of Grant's policy based on Christian agents. "How is it possible that a Christian … mind, who holds his doctrine of 'eternal truth' that must remain valid under all circumstances, at all times and in all nations, can be an effective teacher?!"[48] The socialist journalist did not jettison the whole of Christianity, suggesting that it had useful principles that could promote the civilisation of Indians. But using his acquaintance with anthropology and the dynamics of social evolution, he explained that it was naïve to think that Native Americans could turn into good Christians in the blink of an eye. "Indians are asked to develop in a couple of decades of training courses what the humanity earned in millennia of culture." The positive elements of the Christian religion would need time to flourish according to the slow dynamics of social evolution. To further the process, then, the socialist journalist argued that an "individualist phase" was necessary, ultimately agreeing with the allotment plans discussed by Cleveland and Lamar. "That private property, individualism and the competitive economy have been a good school for humanity and would also be for the Indians, this is unmistakable." It may appear strange to read these words written by a socialist. However, they show how social evolutionism was engrained within German American socialist thinking. Finally, this article, like the aforementioned one on General George Crook and Indian communism, mixed evolutionism and historical materialism, presenting socialism as the future stage of human development: the reason why the present Indian agents were inadequate was because they were not aware that the individualism they were trying to teach was actually "a transition to socialist communism."

Here, anthropology was again deployed as a means to explain the backwardness of Native Americans. However, the author also used it to provide a nuanced understanding of the situation,

[48] "Sollen die Indianer Kommunisten bleiben oder zu Individualisten gemacht werden?," *Sozialist*, November 28, 1885.

both criticising the patronising use of Christian agents and denouncing the implausible expectations on Indian integration. But the socialist writer showed his adhesion to the ideal of racial equality most clearly at the end of the article. "Following the poet's words: 'the tree of humanity urges its flowers to bloom.' The Indian, like the Semite, the Asian and the Negro, is a variety of the human flowering."[49] It is important to understand the intellectual tension behind these words: the *Sozialist* author was not rejecting the anthropological tenets that held that Native Americans to be inferior to whites, nor did he want to stop the social and cultural development of what he categorised as white culture. However, he maintained that this development must include *all* human "flowers." The socialist thinker formulated his opinion in a pre-Boasian framework, and so he did not consider the fact that to assimilate Native Americans within white society was already to obliterate their cultural diversity – and, to some extent, to uproot a human "flower." However, even if he lacked sensitivity with regard to the survival of Indian cultures, the socialist journalist wanted to make sure that members of the Indian human group were part of the future of the humanity.

## Conclusions

The intertwining of historical materialism and anthropological social evolutionism explains the conundrum that opened the third section of this chapter, namely how socialists managed to criticise the rhetoric of "civilisation" used by capitalists on the one hand and defend the idea that whites were more civilised than Native Americans on the other. The apparent contradiction stems from the partial overlapping of historical materialism and anthropological social evolutionism. Using anthropology, socialists maintained that whites were part of a socially and culturally more developed civilisation. This allowed them to label Native Americans as "savages" and postulate that Indians had to go through a phase of individual economic accumulation before being able to reach the level of evolution of industrialised and "developed" white societies. At the same time, socialists

[49] Ibid.

managed to reconcile this position with their historical materialist tenets describing "scientific communism" as the future step in the path of human evolution, and secured themselves solid arguments to attack capitalism and reject its strategy of civilisation for Native Americans. But the above summary should not induce one to think that socialists explicitly spelled out the relationship between evolutionism and historical materialism. SLP members deployed these two theoretical approaches in intermixed and imprecise ways, furnishing an array of different positions which are not confinable within neat categories.

Collectively, the evidence analysed in this chapter sheds light on the ways in which socialists progressively replaced scientific racialist discourses of racial inferiority with analyses focused on levels of civilisation, i.e. social and economic development. They abandoned theories such as Nott's and replaced them with authoritative contemporary sciences, such as anthropology and historical materialism. In doing so, they forged new discourses on race that went beyond simplistic forms of biological racism. But the hesitations and contradictions of SLP members show that the passage from one approach to the other was not smooth and immediate. While rejecting scientific racialism, at times socialists continued to replicate the same tendencies of racial "essentialisation" proper of mid-nineteenth century American racist thinkers; they kept ascribing social and cultural attitudes to the "nature" or innate essence of each racial group, going back to languages and approaches born in the first part of the century with the deliberate objective of proving the inferiority of certain racial groups. Ultimately, the socialist debate on the "Indian Question" captured a phase of development within socialist thought, with trends that started in the 1880s and fully matured only in the 1890s, when the SLP entered a new phase of its history under the leadership of Daniel De Leon.

*Chapter 6*

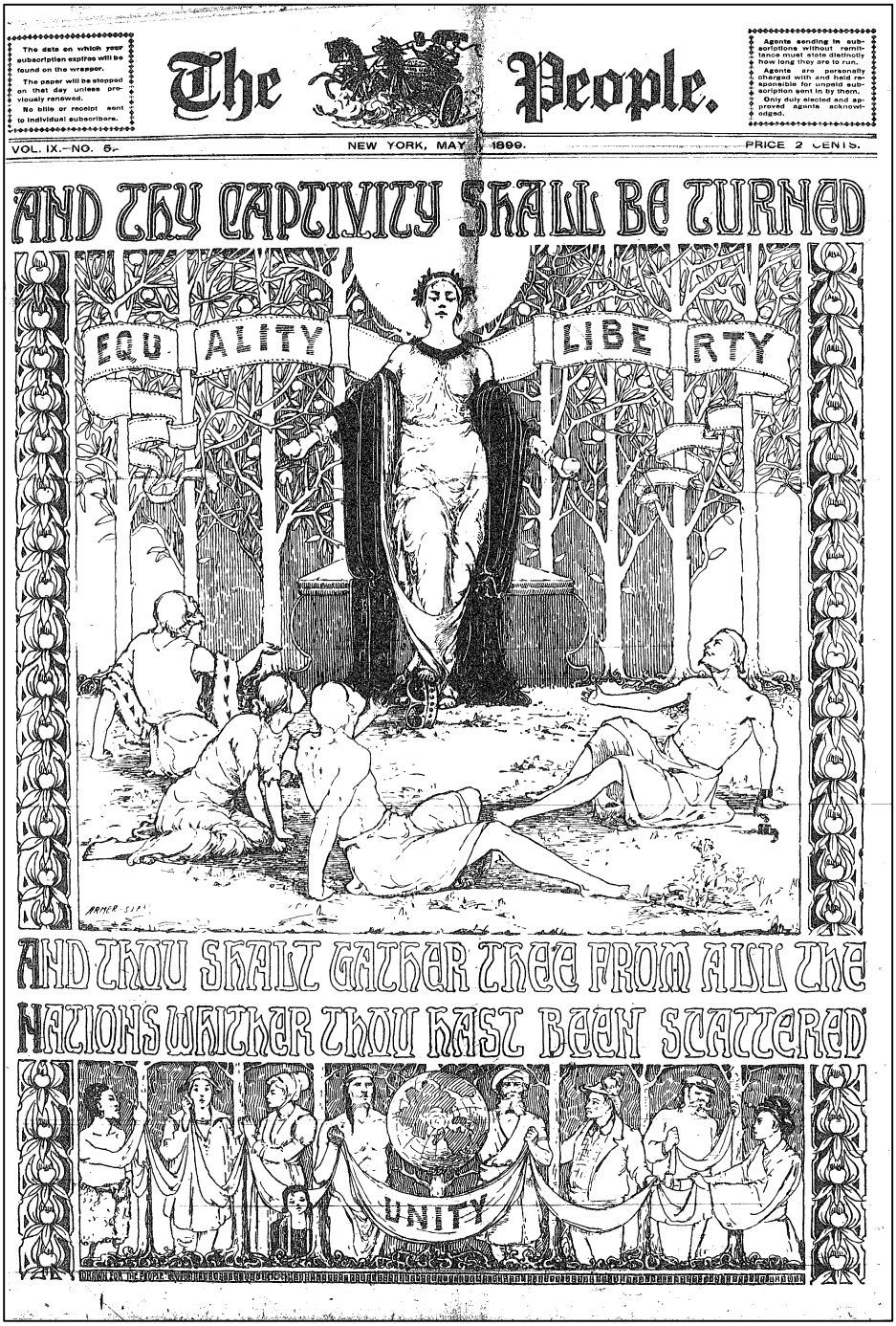
# THE SLP IN THE 1890S: DANIEL DE LEON AND THE VICTORY OF COLOUR-BLIND SOCIALISM

In 1899 the SLP celebrated the International Workers' Day with a special edition of its English-language weekly *The People*. On the front cover, an image of a woman, representing the values of Liberty and Equality, descends from her throne to help some men and women to break the chains that tied them to the ground. In a smaller image below, a group of individuals hold aloft a banner with the word "Unity" emblazoned across it. The line of figures is notable for its racial diversity, and includes, from left to right, an African American man (represented with the aesthetic features of the slave Gordon in the famous image from *Harper's Weekly* in 1863), two white women, a Native American man, three white men and a Chinese man.[1] The special edition was designed to celebrate the achievements of the organisation and to galvanise its activists. The sections had more than tripled in the previous five years, while the party had achieved a record 80,000 votes at the 1898 elections. At the end of the century, the SLP was effectively going through one of the most successful periods of its history.[2]

The celebratory issue of *The People* attested to the changes in the party's approach towards race. The cover image, an explicit celebration of interracial and international solidarity, and the articles littered through the paper made it clear that throughout the 1890s the socialist organisation had formulated a new way to understand racial diversity, an approach based on the centrality of class solidarity among workers of different racial and ethnic background. The SLP had always

[1] *People*, May 1, 1899.
[2] Frank Girard and Ben Perry, *The Socialist Labor Party: a Short History, 1876-1991* (Philadelphia: Livra Books, 1993), 17-22; Rudolph Katz, "With De Leon since '89," in *Daniel De Leon, the Man and His Work: a Symposium* (New York: New York Labor News Company, 1919), 32, 48.

tended to focus on class exploitation as a key category of analysis, instead of racial discrimination; yet members of the party had repeatedly, if inconsistently and with varied perspectives, acknowledged and attempted to address certain aspects of race and ethnicity as factors in their thinking and their politics. The ideas conveyed in the special issue of *The People* represented a decisive consolidation of the party's focus on class by the 1890s, even while acknowledging racial




Source: *People*, May 1, 1899

diversity. This shift marked the SLP's adhesion to a policy which I have defined here as "colour-blind socialism".[3]

Historians have often suggested that, at least from the early twentieth-century onwards, colour or race blindness was the most common approach among American socialists. Using Eugene V. Debs's famous quote "we [socialists] have nothing special to offer to Negro" as a symbol of the times, they have characterised American socialism, even in its most radical expressions, as a political project that had no interest to engage with American racism. In this interpretation, the prefix "colour-blind" has become synonymous of a class reductionist approach that had failed to actively denounce racial discrimination in the country, and therefore had regrettably favoured its perpetration.[4] While existing analyses concentrate on the period of Debsian socialism (i.e. from 1901 onwards) and connect the adoption of a colour-blind framework with the diffusion of Marxism in the country, this chapter places in the 1890s the origins of colour-blind socialism and links this shift to a set of intellectual and historical developments taking place in the SLP during this period. The previous chapters of this thesis have shown how from 1876 the party's approach on race was characterised by two main sets of ideas: colour-blind internationalism and scientific racialism. This chapter outlines how, in the 1890s, the debate in the SLP was clearly settled in favour of colour-blind socialism.

The Marxist thinker Daniel De Leon was the key protagonist of this transition. A Dutch-born graduate in International Law and former Lecturer at Columbia University, De Leon had joined the SLP in 1890 and had rapidly secured the leadership of the party. From his position as editor of *The People*, De Leon had succeeded in an ambitious plan to "Americanise" the SLP and make it a strongly centralised Marxist party.[5] In parallel, De Leon had radically revised the party's approach

[3] B. F. Keinard, "The 'color line' develops into the 'class struggle'", *People*, May 1, 1899.
[4] Thorough discussions of racial policy in the Socialist Party of America can be found in: Sally M. Miller, *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century Socialism* (London; New York: Garland, 1996); William P. Jones, "'Nothing Special to Offer the Negro': Revisiting the "'Debsian View' of the Negro Question," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008), 212-224.
[5] Louis C. Fraina first stressed De Leon's attempt to "Americanise" the American socialist movement. Cf. Louis C. Fraina, "Daniel De Leon," *The New Review* 2, no. 7 (July 1914), 391.

towards race and ethnicity. Under his leadership, the SLP became an organisation firmly committed to advocate racial equality, working class internationalism and an open border policy, while at the same time rejecting the exclusionary scientific racialism which had characterised socialist opinions in the 1880s on Chinese immigration.[6]

The rapid evolution of the history of the SLP in the 1890s raises several questions. Why did an organisation characterised so strongly by its German American identity suddenly let a non-German leader become its only and uncontested leader? In other words, why did De Leon succeed where two generations of German American and American leaders had failed? Another question is relative to the intellectual context of the time. Modern scientific theories of race such as Spencerian Darwinism, anthropology and geographical determinism did not disappear during the 1890s. If anything, they became even more widespread. How did De Leon succeed to move the party toward an approach that was apparently at odds with the intellectual context in which it was formulated?

This chapter discusses these historiographic problems in the light of the SLP's shift towards colour-blind socialism, and advances three interlocked arguments. The first of these arguments focuses on De Leon's peculiar way of understanding his ethnic and national identity, and by extension his specific way of interpreting the problem of race. De Leon's early life is a fascinating example of nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism. He was born in 1852 in Curaçao, a Dutch protectorate off the coast of Venezuela, and he had received his education in his Caribbean hometown, in Europe (Germany and the Netherlands) and in the US (Columbia University). De Leon had Jewish ancestry and was a Dutch citizen. By the time he arrived in the US, at some point between 1872 and 1874, he had mastered five languages (Dutch, English, German, French and Spanish) and was trained in Portuguese, Italian and modern Greek. In the US, he became a Lecturer of International Law at Columbia University, and became involved in the Democratic Party first

[6] Glen Seretan, *Daniel De Leon: the Odyssey of an American Marxist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 85.

and in the mayoral campaign for Henry George later.[7] Scholars of gender and identity politics have adopted the category of "intersectionality" to define the multiple and stratified identities of individuals, characterised at the same time by their gender, their class, their racial and ethnic belonging, their religion and so on.[8] By applying this category to De Leon's biography, we notice the striking fact that while at the end of the 1880s he was an incredibly "multi-layered" and complex individual (at one and the same time, a Dutch citizen, a Jew, an immigrant, a member of the American upper class, and a public intellectual), his conversion to socialism in the early 1890s transformed him into an astonishingly "single-layered" one, fully identifiable with the image and political life of the SLP. Tellingly, once in the SLP, De Leon stopped mentioning any aspect of his past life and instead focused exclusively on spreading Marxism in the US. This chapter makes the point that De Leon's self-representation in the 1890s simply as an American socialist, and his silence on other aspects of his identity which might have confused or complicated that identity, make him a particularly useful individual to examine in order to explain how race and ethnicity both figured and were at times consciously erased in socialist thought.

Secondly, in parallel with this description of De Leon's identity formation, this chapter details the intellectual foundations of his colour-blind socialism. The socialist leader radically opposed pseudo-scientific theories of racial inequality. However, this does not mean that he formulated his theory outside the intellectual context of the time. In fact, his colour-blind Marxism brought to full development many tendencies that this thesis has reconstructed in analysing 1870s and 1880s socialist racial thought. De Leon was a staunch supporter of a version of determinist evolutionism that radically departed from the approaches of earlier German American immigrants such as Adolph

[7] This account is based on Lorenzo Costaguta, "Marxismo, identità, nazione: la vita e il pensiero di Daniel De Leon," in *L'Altronovecento: comunismo eretico e pensiero critico*, ed. Pier Paolo Poggio (Milano: Jaca Book, 2013), 375-390; other surveys on De Leon's life can be found in Seretan, *Daniel De Leon*, 5-46; Stephen Coleman, *Daniel De Leon* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 1-14. On De Leon's language skills, cf. Olive Johnson, *Daniel De Leon, American Socialist Pathfinder* (New York: New York Labor News Company, 1923), 10.

[8] The term "intersectionality" was first used by legal historian Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989), 139-167. For a more recent survey of the uses of intersectionality, especially in Gender Studies, cf.: *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Facet Concept in Gender Studies*, eds. Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar, Linda Supik (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011).

Douai, August Otto-Walster and Paul Grottkau (described in the second chapter of this thesis). Firmly anchoring the anthropological theory of Lewis H. Morgan to Marxist historical materialism – and in this way solving the contradictions discussed in Chapter Five on the "Indian Question –, De Leon formulated an innovative version of evolutionary socialism with strong determinist features, which reduced the vast set of criteria used by anthropologists to analyse levels of development of human groups – social and economic structures, race, culture and religion, systems of kinship – to considerations based almost exclusively on class and production relations. By focusing on De Leon's ideas on evolutionism and historical materialism, the following pages demonstrate that the birth of colour-blind socialism needs to be placed in the 1890s, and that it needs to be connected with the development of a debate on race, evolutionism and class started in the SLP in the 1870s.

Finally, this chapter additionally shows how the adoption of colour-blind socialism shaped socialist policies towards African Americans and how it impacted on internal inter-ethnic relationships. In the 1890s, the SLP started to increase its presence in the US South. This proved to be crucial to favour the production of better analyses on the real possibilities of socialists amongst African Americans. However, while SLP members discussed more often the racial policy of the party, De Leon's colour-blind approach led the party leadership to dismiss the centrality of racial relations in the country and focus on class instead. The outcome of this contradictory set of conditions is paradoxical. In the 1890s, for the first time, the SLP was in the condition to articulate a clear racial policy; however, this policy turned out to be mostly based on the attempt to stir the attention away from race and to focus on class relations instead.

In parallel, inter-ethnic rivalries intertwined with political contrasts in the party, resulting in the definitive replacement of the German American leadership. In the 1890s, De Leon had taken many controversial decisions: he had rejected in principle any sort of alliance with the People's Party, even though the two organisations had clear overlaps in their programmes and could benefit from some sort of association; he had abandoned attempts of "boring from within" the American

Federation of Labor, a decision that, according to many, paved the way to the collaborationist and conservative drift of the largest American trade union federation. This chapter does not discuss the political controversies surrounding De Leon's SLP, a theme that historians have thoroughly investigated and abundantly exhausted.[9] On the contrary, it focuses on the role that ethnic rivalries played in shaping the history of the party in this period. According to the interpretation presented in the following pages, by looking at the rivalry between the "Americanized" De Leon and the proudly German American socialist community, and by explaining this in the light of the formation of colour-blind socialism, it is possible to provide an interpretation that gives the adequate historical centrality to ideas race and ethnicity in the history of American socialism, while at the same time better explaining the trajectory of the party in the 1890s.

## De Leon's SLP: the search for identity, evolutionism and the concept of class

> He, who expired on Monday evening, faded as did so many before him, had died a few decades too late; he outlived himself. True to his maxim to destroy what he could not rule, he concentrated, during the last fifteen years, his vitality and will-power upon tearing down what he, personally, had helped to create. And therein he was great, far greater than in construction and erection. De Leon was, indeed, a destructive genius.[10]

These lines, published in the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* two days after the death of Daniel De Leon in 1914, adequately encapsulate the acrimony generated by the controversial political trajectory of the Marxist leader of the SLP. Not even in the moment of his passing could the *Volkszeitung* pardon

[9] Discussions of De Leon's political strategy include: Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (1903; repr., New York: Russel & Russel, 1965); William Z. Foster, *From Bryan to Stalin* (New York: International Publishers, 1937) 35; Selig Perlman, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States*, (New York: Augustus M. Kelley 1950) 211; David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America. A history* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 1-45; Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement: 1897-1912* (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), 15-25; Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the US* (New York: International Publishers, 1962) 2:296-297; Seretan, *Daniel De Leon*; Coleman, *Daniel De Leon*; Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America. A Complete History* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015).

[10] Coleman, *Daniel De Leon*, 4.

De Leon for all the damages that, in their opinion, the SLP leader had caused to American socialism. In the twenty-four years that De Leon spent guiding the SLP, political differences and personal rivalries combined in creating the dense hatred that separated De Leon and his followers on one side and the core socialist German American community on the other. In order to investigate the origins of these contrasts, it is necessary to go back to when the relationship between De Leon and the German American group first started.

In the second half of the 1880s, the SLP had barely any influence outside the German American community of New York. The problem of ethnic isolation was so evident that even Friedrich Engels pointed it out from London when explaining the weakness of socialism in the US at the time. In a letter to Friedrich A. Sorge about the uprising of the Henry George movement, Engels wrote that "the Germans [in the American socialist movement] have not understood how to use their theory as a lever which could set the American masses in motion …What is more, they learn no English in principle … The specific German character must be laid aside, and for that the gentlemen of the *Sozialist* hardly have any qualifications, while those of the *Volkszeitung* are cleverer only where *business* is involved."[11]

Sorge, despite having abandoned the American socialist movement, still had enough connections in it to provide Engels with accurate updates about the American situation. The two groups mentioned by Engels were the main units in which the socialist community was organised at that moment: the "gentlemen of the *Sozialist*" were the members of the SLP. In late 1880s the party had around seventy sections scattered across the North-east of the country, but its directional centre was firmly rooted in New York. From 1885, an English-language newspaper, the *Workmen's Advocate*, had joined the *Sozialist* in the list of official newspapers of the organisation. The only occasion on which the SLP showed signs of awakening was during the mayoral campaign of 1886 in favour of Henry George, when the socialists actively supported the electoral bid of the famous author of *Progress and Poverty*. The second element mentioned by Engels, the *New Yorker*

[11] Friedrich Engels to Friedrich A. Sorge, November 29, 1886 in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Letters to Americans, 1848-1895. A Selection* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), 162-165.

*Volkszeitung* faction, was a composite grouping of German American intellectuals, trade unionists and activists. Led by Alexander Jonas and Sergius Schewitsch, the faction had ties both with German American trade unions and the SLP. Its daily, founded in 1878, was one of the most influential political beacons in the Lower-East Side German American radical community. After an electoral fiasco at the Presidential elections of 1888, the two groups clashed for control of the SLP: it was only through a split and a legal quarrel that in 1890 the group of activists around the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* emerged as the new leading faction of the organisation.[12]

Considering the acrimony with which German American socialists fought for control of the party, it is quite surprising how easily they let De Leon take full control of the organisation in the early 1890s. In fact, several factors converged to make De Leon the right person in the right place at the right time. Some are connected to specific historical circumstances: when he joined the SLP, De Leon was a highly respectable and acculturate intellectual, a non-German but with an excellent knowledge of the German culture and language, and a staunch supporter of Marxism: a set of features that made him a formidable asset for the tiny an insular socialist organisation. Some other factors are relative to De Leon's individual trajectory: De Leon met socialism in a crucial moment of his life, in a moment in which he was ready to dedicate his entire self to a radically new cause. Much of the success of De Leon's SLP is the result of the absolutist and quasi-fanatic dedication with which De Leon promoted the cause of the party. Finally, the socialist leader had the intellectual credentials to provide the SLP with that intellectual and political cohesion that the movement had failed to achieve until now. Under De Leon, the SLP reached that synthesis between evolutionism, historical materialism and theories of race that generations of German American socialists before him had been incapable to produce. All these aspects combined, which this section will now discuss in more details, explain De Leon's successful ascension to the leadership of the SLP and his contribution to reshape socialist racial thought in the 1890s.

[12] Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts. Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 42-46.

Many of the German American and Jewish leaders that would later become the most vocal critics of his narrow-minded and authoritarian attitude welcomed De Leon with open arms in the early 1890s. An excellent case in point is the Jewish socialist Abraham Cahan, an important SLP leader in the 1890s and the editor of the *Forverts*, the most popular Jewish paper in the US, from 1897 onwards. Cahan detailed in his autobiography the profound impression that the intellectual skills and personal charisma of De Leon made on the older generation of SLP leaders. Cahan wrote that De Leon was "a supremely brilliant speaker and lecturer, being a highly educated and capable person possessing powerful faculties of oratory. His addresses were at all times profound, crystal clear, and scrupulously logical and interesting." Cahan further recalled the first lecture on Marx's theory delivered by De Leon, claiming that "perhaps this was the best exposition on Marxian ideas that had ever been heard in New York." For Cahan, De Leon "was an important acquisition. Since Schevitsch we had no one with as forceful a personality."[13] Besides the support of the older generation of SLP leaders, favoured by his linguistic skills and his ability to interact with the ethnic communities that animated the party, such as the German American and the Jewish communities, De Leon was strategically able to quickly familiarise himself with the structures of the party and manoeuvre to get full control over them. Particularly crucial was De Leon's inventive ability to exploit the power of a position that until that moment had not been recognised in its importance: that of the editor of the English-language paper of the party. This thesis has repeatedly suggested that the press was a fundamental political tool for a geographically scattered and logistically weak movement like the SLP. The way in which De Leon used *The People*, the English-language weekly that from 1891 had replaced the *Workmen's Advocate*, further confirms this point. De Leon made the socialist paper the organ where everything – from party rules to political issues to strategic moves – was debated and approved. Remarkably, throughout the twenty-four years in which De Leon was the leader of the SLP, years in which he fully controlled every single initiative of the party, the only official position he occupied was that of editor of the *People*.

[13] Abraham Cahan, *From 'Bletter fun Mein Leben' by Abraham Cahan*, trans. and ed. Louis Lazarus, 1979, unpublished, Socialist Labor Party Papers, Tamiment Institute, New York.

But what helped De Leon most in consolidating his position was his ability to impose a clear political agenda – an agenda devoted to reshape the ethnic identity of American socialism. As soon as he became the leader of the party, De Leon undertook a profound process of ethnic emancipation of the SLP. The process of Americanisation of the party ranged from practical aspects to cultural and theoretical ones. De Leon worked in close cooperation with Lucien Sanial, Hugo Vogt and Henry Kuhn in reorganising the structures of the SLP. The English-language *People* became the party's main publication; the German-language *Sozialist* was replaced by the *Vorwärts* and turned into the weekly edition of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*. Whereas after the National Convention of 1893 minutes and platforms were still published in German, by 1896 English was the main language used for the official material of the party. As stressed by SLP historians Girard and Perry, the names of the participants in the 1896 Congress reflected the more substantial presence of American workers in the party - a tendency confirmed in the Congress of 1900.[14]

Arguably the most profound reform undertaken by De Leon related to *The People*. From the columns of the party paper, the SLP leader started a relentless labour of socialist pedagogy, using the theories of Marx to illustrate to American workers what he believed to be the reasons for their exploitation. De Leon repeatedly expounded the key tenets of historical materialism, the theory of salaries and the Marxian law of value. But he did not simply reproduce the theories of the German socialist; he framed them with distinctively American cultural references. An example of De Leon's effort is the "Uncle Sam and Brother Jonathan" series, a weekly column which featured fictional debates between Uncle Sam, as not only the personification of the US but also a scholarly and opinionated expert on Marx's theories, and Brother Jonathan, an American worker unfamiliar with the dynamics of the American economy and organised labour. It is far too easy to identify Uncle Sam with De Leon himself, in the fashion of the "red pedagogue" devoted to the education of the

[14] Girard and Perry, *The Socialist Labor Party*, 18; Socialist Labor Party, *Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Convention of the Socialist Labor Party, held at Grand Central Palace, 43 st. and Lexington Ave., N.Y. City. July 4th to July 10th, 1896*, ed. Robert Bills, accessed 27 October 2015, http://www.slp.org/pdf/slphist/nc_1896.pdf; Socialist Labor Party, *Proceedings of the Tenth National Convention of the Socialist Labor Party held in New York City, June 2 to June 8, 1900* (New York: New York Labor News Company, 1901).

naïve American working class, but the fact that he chose Uncle Sam to represent his own transposition is revealing of the most profound objective of this series. The leader of the SLP aimed to interlink socialist standpoints with the pillars of American culture, departing from the idea that socialism was an imported ideology.[15]

It is ironic that one of the first leaders who made some real progresses in Americanising the US socialist movement was not born in the United States, and in fact was not an American at all. Yet, possibly in this circumstance lies one of the reasons of De Leon's success. By looking at his peculiar biographical trajectory, we notice not only the "apprehended" nature of De Leon's Americanism, but also the connection between his Americanism and his adhesion to socialism. It is crucial to note that at the time of his arrival in the US in the early 1870s, De Leon was essentially a stateless person. He had lived between Europe and America, far from his family, without any precise identity in terms of nationality or social class. Until he was fifteen, he had grown up in Curaçao, a stratified and anomalous society, recently colonised by the Dutch but with century-old European settlements, like the Jewish community in which the De Leons lived.[16] He had arrived in Europe immediately after Italian unification, and had experienced German unification in person during his high school formation in Hildesheim. Even his settling in American society had been problematic, between ill-fated working experiences and personal losses (in 1887 De Leon lost his first wife and one of his infant sons). De Leon's academic trajectory is somehow paradigmatic of the problems he experienced before 1890: his career at Columbia ran in parallel to that of Edwin R. A. Seligman, who had finished a Ph.D. in 1885 and had started his first term of lectureship at a time when De Leon was in his second. The future SLP leader actually decided to resign from Columbia

[15] Daniel De Leon, "Uncle Sam and Brother Jonathan," *People*, 1891-1899.
[16] On Curaçao in the mid-nineteenth century, cf. Alan F. Benjamin, *Jews of the Dutch Caribbean: Exploring Ethnic Identity in Curaçao* (London: Routledge, 2002); Josette C. Goldish, *Once Jews: Stories of Caribbean Sephardim* (Princeton: Wiener, 2007).

when he found out that Seligman was offered a full Professorship, whereas he was only optioned for a third three-year contract as Lecturer.[17]

The intersections between these two intellectuals make evident the salient feature of De Leon's early life: a tumultuous search for a social, national and cultural identity. Despite his troubled past, De Leon had managed to climb up to the threshold of a serene life as a tenured academic in one of the most prestigious universities in the country. However, this possibility was precluded by De Leon's intellectual unreliability. It is likely that Columbia decided not to offer De Leon a permanent position because of his political activism: by 1890, the young academic had already shown his radical tendencies, having taken part in Henry George's movement, the Knights of Labor and Bellamy's Nationalists. Considering the instability of De Leon's life until this point, it may be clearer why the beginning of his experience in the SLP – destined to last for twenty-four years – has been seen as such an important break in his life. For De Leon, membership of the SLP was a point of arrival, the end of a troubled path in search of his place in the world. De Leon joined the socialist movement for intellectual, political and identitarian reasons. He found in it not only an occupation and a political credo, but also a fundamental reason of life.[18]

The quasi-religious features of his totalising "conversion" to socialism are evident if we consider another peculiarity of his post-1890 intellectual production: throughout his writings, De Leon never discussed his pre-socialist life. Even though he published hundreds of articles as editor of the *People*, he delivered tens of speeches around the country, some of which were recorded and published afterwards, and he authored several pamphlets on labour in the US and the socialist doctrine, none of this material lingered on any personal aspect of his pre-SLP life. The complete absence of any mention of his tumultuous past shows a conscious will to erase certain aspects of his complex and multi-layered identity. In some cases, it is not difficult to track down specific political

[17] On De Leon and Seligman, cf. Thomas Bender, *Intellect and Public Life: Essays on the Social History of Academic Intellectuals in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 54-57.
[18] Costaguta, "Marxismo, identità, nazione," 377-378; for an interpretation of De Leon's early life centred on the image of the "Wandering Jew", cf. Seretan, *Daniel De Leon*, 5-81; on De Leon at Columbia, cf. Seretan, *Daniel De Leon*, 16-17.

reasons behind this move. For example, biographers suggest that at some point in the 1880s De Leon worked as a lawyer in Texas. Few other occupations had such a negative image among workers as the law – hence De Leon's strategic decision to never mention it.[19] But apart from this specific case, the decision to cut his links with his past coheres with the way in which the SLP leader came to conceive of his individual mission in the American socialist movement, a mission that implied a representation of himself as the American agent of the socialist doctrine in the country.

Yet it would be inaccurate to represent De Leon as a full-fledged supporter of Americanism. It is undeniable that by the 1890s the SLP leader conceived of himself as a US citizen, and by that time he had a solid command over the history, culture and tradition of the country. On the other hand, he avoided any concession to the rhetoric of nationalism and exceptionalism that permeated the political culture of the country. In his opinion, the widespread idea that the US was in some way different and superior than other nations was dangerous and pointless. In 1893, he wrote that "America is part of our planetary system. She is subject to all the laws – geologic, biologic and sociologic – of all other nations ... The sooner we drop the silly conceit that we are not as the others are, the better. That day we shall be free from one of the most enslaving fetters with which the enemy has shackled the public mind."[20]

The point is that De Leon used his policy of Americanisation of the party as a strategy to solve the chronic problem of ethnic isolationism, but it is doubtful whether he saw any real value in belonging to the US as a cultural, social and political entity. De Leon had no difficulty in using nationalist rhetoric if doing this would achieve his political objective (the diffusion of socialism), but personally, national, ethnic and racial allegiances did not have a value in themselves. An analysis of De Leon's intellectual background, especially if focused on his approach towards theories of race and historical materialism, helps clarify his approach on these matters.

[19] James Stalvey, *Daniel De Leon: a Study of Marxian Orthodoxy in the United States* (Chicago: unpublished PhD. Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1946), 23.
[20] Daniel De Leon, "A hoary headed delusion," *People*, June 18, 1893.

In *Positivist Republic*, intellectual historian Gillis J. Harp has stressed that by the beginning of the Gilded Age not only Darwinism, English positivist empiricism and German idealism had contributed to reshape the American intellectual framework. Comtean positivism, maintains Harp, played a great role in forging the radical and reformist plans of late nineteenth century intellectuals such as T. B. Wakeman, Edward Bellamy and Lester Ward. De Leon should be included in the list of those who relied upon Comtean positivism to structure their radical approach. Not only does his brief militancy in the Nationalist Clubs of Bellamy provide historical evidence of his exposure to positivist ideas, but several aspects in his writings support this connection. Holism, organicism and historicism, according to Harp, are part of the legacy of Comtean positivism in the US.[21] De Leon framed his ideas using all three of them.

A case in point is the article "The philosophy of the history of political parties" that De Leon wrote for the *People* in 1895. In this piece, the socialist leader divided American history into three big phases, and contended that each of them was intimately connected to the "historical mission" of one party: the Democratic party, "born by the democratic breath of Thomas Jefferson," had contributed to the history of the country by defeating the elitist tendencies of Hamilton and placing freedom as the leading American value; the Republican Party, "born of a people's determination to abolish chattel slavery; inspired by Lincoln's great motto 'this country must be either all slave or all free'," had delivered its mission of establishing liberty for all after the Civil War. The third phase, yet to come, would be led by the socialist movement.

If the title of the article and its tripartite structure recalled Hegelian dialectic, the description of political parties relied heavily on positivist organicism. De Leon wrote that "a political party with a clear-cut central idea and programme soundly planted attracts stalwarts that bring it up to manhood, lead it to victory and put its programme through. After its historic mission is fulfilled, it, like the butterfly that has laid its eggs, wilts and decomposes."[22] The Democratic and the

[21] Gillis J. Harp, *Positivist Republic: Auguste Comte and the Reconstruction of American Liberalism, 1865-1920* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 10, 71-108.
[22] Daniel De Leon, "The philosophy of the history of political parties," *People*, April 21, 1895.

Republican Party would disappear soon. Among the existing political groups, De Leon maintained, the SLP was the one expected to pick up the torch of freedom and carry it to lead the US along its path towards universal emancipation.[23]

But De Leon's most evident positivist tract was his strict identification between natural laws and social laws, and more precisely between biology and sociology. In *Reform or Revolution*, a programmatic speech delivered in 1896, De Leon openly declared that "the laws that rule sociology run upon lines parallel with and are the exact counterparts of those that natural science has established in biology."[24] As a biologist could study the laws of nature and understand the evolution of living beings, so the sociologist could study the laws of social interaction and understand the evolution of society. De Leon, coupling his positivism with his Marxism, believed that class was the fundamental principle of sociology, and class struggle the most important sociological law to understand social evolution:

> In the first place, the central figure in biology is the species, not the individual specimen. In sociology, the economic classes take the place of the species in biology. Consequently, that is the central figure on the field of sociology that corresponds to and represents the species on the field of biology. In the second place, struggle, and not piping peace; assimilation by the ruthless process of the expulsion of all elements that are not fit for assimilation, and not external coalition – such are the laws of growth in biology, and such are and needs must be the laws of growth in sociology.
>
> Hence, Socialism recognizes in modern society the existence of a struggle of classes, and the line that divides the combatants to be the economic line that separates the interests of

[23] Ibid.
[24] Don McKee, "Daniel De Leon: a Reappraisal," *Labor History* 1, 3 (1960): 264-297; Daniel De Leon, "Reform or Revolution: An Address Delivered by Daniel De Leon under the Auspices of the People's Union, at Wells' Memorial Hall, Boston, January 26, 1896," accessed June 8, 2016, https://www.marxists.org/archive/deleon/pdf/1896/RefRev.pdf, 7.

the property-holding capitalist class from the interests of the propertiless class of the proletariat. [25]

In this sense, there is a shift from the theories of 1880s German American socialists that needs to be explained. De Leon and German American intellectuals of the 1880s shared the desire to use science and biology to investigate human characteristics and social interactions. However, whereas for socialists like Douai, Grottkau and Otto-Walster geographical determinism and the "survival of the fittest" – understood in a Spencerian way – were evidently parts of their contemporary intellectual framework, for De Leon debates on the evolution of animal species and the extent to which Darwinism was applicable to social dynamics were no longer of central interest. It is no mere coincidence that in the opening number of *The People* in 1891 the socialist leadership claimed that Spencer's theories, despite their undeniable quality, were too much affected by the middle class origin of their author to provide any adequate contextualisation of the coming socialist revolution. One of the missions of the paper, stressed in its opening editorial, was to reply to the intellectuals of the Spencer School and show "the actual course of social evolution."[26]

De Leon replaced Spencerian Darwinism with an eclectic mixture of approaches: together with the aforementioned historical materialism and positivism, the SLP leader included also the tenets of anthropological evolutionism. Especially in the works of Friedrich Engels and Lewis H. Morgan, De Leon found the key principles to create his own version of the sociological laws that explained human history. These laws stated that human beings went through stages of evolution, that the future stage would be socialism and that the passage from one stage to the other was

[25] Daniel De Leon, "Reform or Revolution," 8.
[26] "Herbert Spencer", *People*, April 5, 1891; for the key tenets of Darwin's and Spencer's theories, cf. respectively: Charles Darwin, *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859; repr. London: Electric Book Co., 2001); Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* (1855; repr. New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1910). In this chapter, I deliberately avoid the phrase "Social Darwinism" because I contend, with Robert C. Bannister and Thomas C. Leonard, that it does not help to explain how theories of race developed during the Gilded Age. Cf. infra, Introduction and Chap. 2; Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Robert C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); Thomas C. Leonard, "Origins of the Myth of Social Darwinism: The Ambiguous Legacy of Richard Hofstadter's Social Darwinism in American Thought," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 71 (2009): 37-51.

determined by a clash between economic classes. By taking class as the only paradigm of analysis, De Leon's framework rejected any sort of scientific racialist theory that postulated the existence of different races, cultures, or human groupings: the humankind was one and only one. De Leon's theory was strictly determinist: evolution *will* happen, and it will happen according to the norms codified by sociology. Crucially, De Leon's interest in the theories of Morgan was not connected to any fascination with anthropology on the part of the SLP leader. As I have detailed in Chapter Five, Marx's intellectual curiosity had brought him to study the practices of "primitive" populations around the world and to doubt the alleged modernity of capitalism. Conversely, De Leon used the theories of the American anthropologist exclusively as proof of the coming of socialism, described as the future step of human development. De Leon's use of Morgan is paradoxical. While he included *Ancient Society* amongst the core readings for any American socialist, he showed no real interest in the actual content of the book, which discussed in detail the social structures of human societies from "savagism" to civilisation. De Leon was not interested in anthropology. In *The People*, it is rare to find anything about indigenous cultures, "pre-modern" societies or Native Americans, for example. The only aspect of Morgan's book that the leader of the SLP found interesting was its mechanist evolutionism – the scientific confirmation that human progress moved along a mono-dimensional line from barbarism to civilisation.[27]

In concluding this section, three aspects need to be foregrounded. First, De Leon's colour-blind socialism was not out of touch with the intellectual context of the time. It was deeply immersed in the evolutionist and scientist trends that characterised late Gilded Age America. His synthesis succeeded because, for the first time, it provided an adequate contextualisation of historical materialism within the contemporary intellectual scenario, rejecting those aspects of Spencerism that were incompatible with socialism, while at the same time providing scientific respectability to Marxist socialism. Second, De Leon's personal trajectory should be understood in

[27] Cf. infra, chaps. 2 and 5. On De Leon and Morgan, cf. Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States. A History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 2013), 54-55; Mark Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought. 1870-1920* (Madison, Wis.; London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 103; H. S. Sley, "Literary Notice", *People*, February 7, 1897.

the light of his own version of colour-blind socialism. After he had joined the SLP, and after he had polished up his sociological theory, De Leon had applied to his self-representation the materialist and determinist tenets of his credo. After 1890, De Leon saw himself exclusively as a socialist agitator, a member of the "propertiless class of the proletariat." He was no longer a Jew, a Dutchman, an immigrant, a former lecturer and public intellectual, and so on. Only class allegiance defined individual identities, therefore he became the red voice of the American working class. Finally, and crucially, given the intellectual premises described in this section, it is evident why ethnic, national, and racial allegiances had only a secondary importance in De Leon's colour-blind socialist strategy. De Leon had taken inspiration from a set of theories that emphasised the centrality of social structures in shaping dynamics of power in human interactions, but while for some of his sources "social structures" included factors such as culture, race, religion and so on, in De Leon's mind it all boiled down to class relations. The next section will detail how De Leon's colour-blind socialism shaped the policies of the SLP with regards to race and immigration.

## "A special division in the ranks of Labor:" De Leon's SLP on African Americans

During the 1890s, one of the main circumstances that had limited the diffusion of the SLP among African Americans in the 1870s and 1880s progressively changed: the party started to have sections in the South. By the end of the century, the SLP had representatives in Texas, Georgia, Alabama, and Maryland.[28] Large areas of the South, such as the Carolinas, Louisiana, or Florida, remained outside the SLP's reach. But this moderate expansion put the movement in the condition to discuss the problem of race with the support of local militants, who could provide first-hand information on the possibility of diffusion of socialism in these areas. What is more, the SLP leadership started to devote a more regular attention to the specific set of problems caused by tensions along lines of race.

[28] *People*, May 1, 1899.

The new strategy of colour-blind socialism provided a set of clear indications to explain racial conflicts, and *The People*'s editor De Leon did not miss any occasion to make this point of view clear.

In 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois famously wrote that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." De Leon, writing six years earlier, used the same language when arguing that after the Civil War "the class line – not the color line, THAT cuts no figure – was drawn sharper between [African Americans and] the Republicans." De Leon was here commenting on the reaction of the New York-based *The Age* to the composition of the cabinet appointed by President William McKinley in January 1897. The African American weekly lamented the fact that many Southern whites were part of the cabinet and denounced the way in which the Republican Party was treating its black electorate. De Leon disagreed with the idea that race was the problem here. He argued that if African Americans "look more closely at facts, they will discover that the neglect of which they complain is in no way attributable to their color, but is closely akin to the treatment which the Republican party bestows on the WORKING CLASS, regardless of 'race, creed or previous condition of servitude'… it is not as BLACKS that the Republican party turns its back upon them but as PROLETARIANS. And that is the central truth."[29] In order to make his point, De Leon went back to discuss African American treatment during Reconstruction. After the Civil War, wrote the SLP leader, the Republicans needed African Americans to win their sectional fight against Southern elites and impose their power on the country. But now that time had passed. Now the Republican Party was firmly in control of the situation, and the support of black workers was no longer needed. According to De Leon, African Americans were excluded by McKinley because they were no longer functional to Republican political interests, not because of their race. De Leon expressed hopes that "the colored workers be penetrated with this fact." Only in that case would they understand that "their trials are identical" to those of "their other fellow workers," and

[29] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; repr., New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 9; Daniel De Leon, "Restiveness among colored workingmen," *People*, May 9, 1897.

that they should "join in the pursuit of the class aims of their, the working class – the overthrown of the system of wage slavery."[30]

In another circumstance, De Leon attacked the famous African American leader Frederick Douglass, at that point a seventy-year old founding father of the movement for black rights. While eulogising Douglass for an article in the *A.M.E. Church Review* where he denounced the circumstances of economic exploitation of black workers, De Leon deprecated the African American leader's inability to "realize that the plight of the Negro is the plight of Labor in general…. That the present cause of the one is the cause of both; and that their salvation depends upon the abolition of present slavocracy—the capitalist class or plutocracy of the land."[31] Douglass, continued De Leon, "can today be looked upon as a striking monument of the impotence of the warm heart unguided by intelligence. If he possessed the knowledge requisite to guide his feelings… he would be today in the ranks of the Socialists, instead of in those of the very ones whose systems keeps the Negro in degradation."

It is remarkable how, in both these occasions, the SLP leader grounded his analysis on African Americans' presumed ignorance of their condition of economic exploitation. De Leon conceived of socialism as a new approach that would produce a change of paradigm in which race would simply stop to be a category of analysis. But, in these articles, he did not even feel the need to directly address black workers, apparently assuming that once they would be "informed" about the new truth brought by socialism, they would naturally start to converge to the socialist movement. This way of framing the issue was typical of De Leon's determinist approach: given the sociological laws of social evolution, underlying class dynamics *will* come to the fore, and at that point African American workers will realise the necessity of adopting the socialist point of view.

However, it is crucial to stress that De Leon's determinism did not prevent him from seeing the presence of racism in the country and from making racial equality the pillar of his intellectual framework. By definition, colour-blind socialism was based on the premise of the unity of the

[30] Ibid.
[31] Daniel De Leon, "Stone-blind Douglass," *People*, October 19, 1894.

humankind and on the rejection of any division along lines of race. Especially in one occasion, in 1904, De Leon found himself openly reinstating this fundamental aspect of his approach, commenting on a proposal put forward by a group of members of the International at the Amsterdam Congress of the organisation. The plank, signed also by a group of American socialists from the Socialist Party of America, which had been founded in 1901, proposed to limit immigration on the basis of race, referring specifically to "workingmen of backward races (Chinese, Negroes, etc.)." Rejecting the proposal, De Leon wrote: "Where is the line that separates "inferior" from "superior" races? …Socialism knows not such insulting, iniquitous distinctions as 'inferior', and 'superior' races among the proletariat."[32] Here De Leon recalled an idea that we have already seen expressed by Friedrich A. Sorge to describe the situation of American workers in the 1860s, and that recently Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger have labelled "the production of difference:" capitalism was the responsible of the perpetuation of racial divisions. De Leon wrote that "to the native American proletariat, the Irish was made to appear an "inferior" race; to the Irish, the German; to the German, the Italian; to the Italian—and so down the line… It is for capitalism to fan the fires of such sentiments in its scheme to keep the proletariat divided."[33]

However, provided that no constitutive or biological racial difference separated men and women, De Leon acknowledged the possibility that race had a social or cultural impact. Commenting on the outcome of a meeting of an African American society based in Boston, De Leon wrote words that clearly acknowledged the peculiar position of the black community within American society. The SLP leader argued:

> The negro constitute, by reason of the special history back of him, a special division in the ranks of Labor … In no economic respect is he different from his fellow wage slaves of the other races; yet by reason of his race, which long was identified with

[32] Daniel De Leon, *Flashlights of the Amsterdam International Socialist Congress, 1904* (1904; repr. New York: New York Labor News Company, 1923).
[33] Ibid.; David Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

> serfdom, the rays of the Social Question reached his mind through such broken prisms that they were refracted into all the colors of the rainbow, preventing him from appreciating the white light of the Question.[34]

De Leon did not contradict his belief that African Americans were "wage slaves" like any other American labourer. However, he acknowledged the exceptionality of the black worker in the "ranks of Labor." African Americans had a specific historical background, and, crucially, it was their race that made their history special. In acknowledging this aspect, De Leon moved a step forward in recognising that race was a social construction, and that its social and economic impact needed to be analysed even if one did not believe in the existence of biologically defined human races.

The problem is that De Leon never moved beyond this theoretical analysis of the position of the black worker in the American society. In no article signed by him between 1890 and 1900 could we find a clear policy towards African Americans, which included practical moves to expand the African American membership of the party.[35] De Leon remained half-way: his colour-blind framework cancelled the ambiguity towards scientific racialism of early socialist theories, harnessing firmly socialism to the idea of racial equality; but his determinism limited his capacity to come up with a clear policy on race for the SLP.

Party members filled this void. As already mentioned, in this period the SLP did have members in the South; moreover, also members in the North wrote about how socialism might solve the peculiar problems of African Americans. In 1898, the New Jersey activist Robert Windon titled his contribution in the *People*: "What will socialism do for the Negro?" According to Windon, socialism would improve the living conditions of black Americans from two points of view: first, socialism "will abolish competition" in the workplace and "will establish the public ownership of the means of production." With these two measures, black workers will stop being discriminated

[34] Daniel De Leon, "Good for the negroes!", *Daily People*, December 31, 1903.
[35] The SLP (still in existence at the moment of writing) has made articles authored by De Leon available online at this address: https://www.marxists.org/archive/deleon/pdf/index.htm. Accessed February 15, 2017.

against by employers and "the negro will be a part owner with his white neighbor in all the nation's capital." Second, and crucially, Windon argued that socialism, by "bring[ing] about universal education," will sweep away prejudices against blacks, because "race prejudices cannot exist with true enlightenment."[36]

Windon's piece articulated with clarity what African Americans should expect in the future socialist Commonwealth, and how the internationalist and colour-blind philosophy of socialism planned to address racial discrimination. If compared with many vague socialist analyses of the 1870s and 1880s, his article represented a step forward in the conceptualisation of the relationship between socialism and race, but the content, once again, focused on an abstract future without engaging with present conditions. What was the immediate plan of the SLP for the advancement of the African American community? What could black workers hope for if they voted socialist in a local election? Windon was silent on these aspects of the problem.

A more detailed point of view came from J. Howard Sharp, an SLP member located in Greenfield, Tennessee. Unlike Windon, Sharp extensively discussed the social circumstances of black workers and the economic conditions of the South, listing several problems that impeded the spread of socialism. The first issue mentioned by the socialist activist was the African Americans' lack of education:

> The greatest obstacle to progress is ignorance. Whether this results from the negro's ineptitude or from a deliberate and concerted effort on the part of the ruling class to prevent his enlightenment, opinions will differ, but the treatment accorded [to] the Blair Education bill by Southern legislators … would support the latter belief.[37]

[36] Rober Windon, "What will socialism do for the Negro?", *People*, December 4, 1898.
[37] J. Howard Sharp, "The negro question in America," *People*, August 29, 1897; The Blair Education bill, a proposal put forward by the Republican Congressman Henry W. Blair in 1891, advocated the use of Federal funds to favour programs of education and prevent exclusion from the franchise based in illiteracy. Cf. Gordon B. McKinney, *Henry W. Blair's Campaign to Reform America: From the Civil War to the U.S. Senate* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2013).

After ignorance, Sharp mentioned the working conditions of black labourers. He detailed how, despite emancipation, African Americans still worked in rural environments subjected to unfair contractual conditions. Many had not moved from the plantation where they had lived before the war, and paternalist dynamics still tied them to their employers. "The negro is in a measure loyal to his employer, and the hold of the whites is strong upon him."[38] What is more, the prejudice of white Southerners made it impossible to interact socially with African Americans. "White men and women who have come from the North have been frequently forced to leave. Even Southern white Republicans who have organized the negroes have been boycotted and socially ostracized." Sharp's conclusions were pessimistic: "Northern comrades can judge from this what must be the moral courage of him who attempts to organise Socialist Sections among the negroes." Ultimately, given these circumstances, Sharp contended that the only possibility available for socialists was to "make converts among the more intelligent and honest negroes, furnish them with means and literature, and leave it to them to carry on the work among their race."[39]

Sharp's article is arguably the most comprehensive analysis of the possibilities of the SLP in the South published in the *People* during those years. In a number of different ways, it is comparable to the articles published by Adolph Douai and August Otto-Walster in the socialist press in the late 1870s. After giving a more accurate description of working conditions and racial relations in the South, Sharp concluded his article with a proposal that was much more plausible and detailed than the ones offered by the two 1870s German American leaders. The idea of putting the job of spreading socialism among African American in the hands of black socialists was the exact opposite of Douai's idea of using Northern white immigrants as the agents of socialist organisation.

The article that Sharp sent to *The People* also sheds light on another important factor, namely the fact that forms of racial prejudice, which the official position of the SLP firmly rejected, remained implicit in the opinions of socialist members, especially those coming from the South.

[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

Sharp's hesitation to reject the idea that African Americans were ignorant as a result of their own ineptitude was not the only case in point. Harry R. Engel, an SLP member from Birmingham, Alabama, voiced similar ideas to explain why socialism struggled in the South:

> The widespread illiteracy due to a woeful lack of schools and the impervious minds of the negros [*sic*] are among the barriers, well-nigh insurmountable, encountered here. Our literature and mode of reasoning is abstruse to people who use only a monosyllabic dialect or the patois of the negro.[40]

These opinions confirm that Southern socialists surely had a better acquaintance with the reality of African Americans than their comrades in the North, but they were also more prone to absorb forms of racial prejudice. The way in which both Sharp's and Engel's opinions were formulated left ample room to the idea that blacks were naturally inferior, being either "inept" or endowed with "impervious minds".

In conclusion, if we compare socialist approaches of the 1890s with those of the 1870s and 1880s, we see that much of the diversity (and confusion) that had characterised the early phase of the SLP had disappeared. To some extent, this was the result of the uniform strategy worked out by De Leon. His emphasis on class led the SLP away from any sort of theory of racial differentiation based on essentialist, scientist or biologist arguments. This may sound paradoxical, knowing how strongly De Leon valued the connection between biology and sociology, but in fact it was the direct consequence of his strict use of the concept of class according to the analytical framework described in the first section of this chapter. The colour-blind position defined by De Leon and embraced by American socialists in this period did not use Darwinism or scientific racialism to explain differences between human races. It rejected the idea that human groups with different biological features competed in a perennial struggle for existence. In fact, it rejected the idea that

[40] Harry R. Engel, "Alabama. Cimerian conditions of backwardness," *People*, May 1, 1899.

different human groups existed at all. De Leon used "race" only as a social concept, which had shaped the history of certain groups. By doing so, De Leon and his followers severed any connection with those who argued that blacks behaved in a "lazy" way *because they were black*, or Native Americans acted as savages *because they were Native Americans*. There were exceptions to this trend, as the articles by Sharp and Engel show. But as a general rule the adoption of a race-neutral point of view closed up one of the theoretical gaps that had given rise to racism among socialists in the 1870s and 1880s.

On the other hand, in the positions advocated by De Leon and his followers are already evident the factors that would lead American socialism to struggle to understand the role of race in the country. De Leon was arguably the first socialist leader to write, explicitly, that "there is no race question, nor color question… What there IS is the Humanity Question—the SOCIAL QUESTION."[41] The well-intended attempt of De Leon and his followers to shift the conversation away from racial differences and focus on economic inequalities carried along the undesirable consequence of making socialists inattentive towards the ways in which race still shaped social and economic circumstances, especially in the South but not exclusively.

## Immigration and immigrant communities within the SLP

De Leon's approach led the SLP to reshape other aspects of its policies. First, it strengthened the SLP's pro-immigration stance. Secondly, it led to a clash between De Leon's group and some key immigrant communities within the party, a clash that profoundly altered the history of the SLP after 1899. The SLP's stance on immigration was consistent during the whole of the 1890s, and it was not – as in other cases – the exclusive expression of the decisions of its leader Daniel De Leon, but was actively supported by other members of the party outside De Leon's circle, such as the important German American leader Alexander Jonas. The SLP in the 1890s did not indulge in

[41] Daniel De Leon, "Is there a 'Woman Question'?," *People*, January 14, 1900.

protectionist stances, as it did in the 1880s on the issue of Chinese immigration. On the contrary, it defended the right of foreign workers to enter the country and look for a job in the US.

It rejected protectionism, labelling it as pointless and inadequate to solve the problems of American workers. Socialists responded to the nativist cries of employers and workers' associations that called for anti-immigrant measures. Employers and American workers, according to socialists, had different reasons for advocating protectionism. Employers had an interest in stopping the flow of immigrants that made big cities turbulent and politically uncontrollable. Workers, by contrast, thought that the end of immigration could ease the strong competition they were experiencing in the workplace as a result of the economic crisis that broke out in 1893.[42] Socialists replied to nativist cries with various arguments. The most common one focused on the contradictions of capitalism itself: historically, socialists maintained, immigration had been used by capitalists to secure a surplus of workers on lower wages. Socialists suggested then that the nativist stance embraced by employers at that time would be abandoned as soon as more workers' competition was required to lower salaries again. "The anti-immigration movement of the present reminds one of the anti-machinery of the past," wrote a socialist in the *People* in 1897, suggesting that immigration was a side issue with respect to the dynamics of capitalism. "Not immigration, but capitalism is overstocking the labor market and making the applicants for jobs more numerous than the jobs."[43]

Secondly, socialists argued that anti-immigration sentiments were simply anti-historical. "We [Americans] are barely seventy million people spread over a territory which including Alaska is very nearly as large as the whole of Europe, whose natural resource are not supposed to be as great as those of the United States."[44] Increased immigration, socialists argued, should be the desired goal of a relatively young and under-populated country such as the US. To go against it was tilting at windmills. Finally, socialists argued that demonising immigrants was a strategy used by capitalists to delegitimise the working class as a whole and to dump both American and foreign workers into a

[42] "Immigration and socialism. The gist of the question given in a nut-shell," *People*, December 25, 1892.
[43] "Immigration. As seen from the workingmen's point of view," *People*, December 26, 1897; "Immigration. Shall it be limited, or shall capitalism be suppressed?," *People*, March 22, 1896.
[44] "Immigration. Shall it be limited", *People*, March 22, 1896.

category of "anti-American traitors" who should be disenfranchised. By embracing nativism, socialists held, workers were favouring the strategy of capitalist employers.[45] The internationalist breadth that animated De Leon's SLP followed in the steps of socialist trade unionists in the 1870s and the Knights of Labor in the 1880s, and found later support in the approach of the Industrial Workers of the World.

Besides consolidating the internationalist position of the SLP, De Leon's approach brought to important changes in the internal relations between immigrant communities in the party. The 1890s was a decade of rising tensions between De Leon's faction on the one side, which sought to "Americanise" the socialist movement in accordance with the strategy decided by its leader, and some immigrant communities on the other, especially the German Americans and the Jews, that grew more and more dissatisfied with the political strategy and bossy leadership style of the Marxist leader. The disagreement between these two groups reached breaking point in the summer of 1899. After months of friction and reciprocal accusations in party newspapers, the German American group tried to organise a coup to oust De Leon and the National Executive Committee from their control of the party. However, De Leon and his followers, as the elected leadership, managed to keep the control of the organisation, even if only after a year-long legal battle. Eventually, after the end of the legal quarrel the separatist faction joined forces with Eugene Debs's Social Democratic Party and founded the Socialist Party of America (SPA) in 1901, starting a new page of the history of socialism in the US.[46]

The faction that opposed De Leon's leadership throughout the 1890s included some of the most important figures of the party, such as Morris Hillquit and Abraham Cahan, popular leaders in the New York City Jewish community, and Hermann Schlüter, former member of the German SPD and editor of the *New Yorker Volkszeitung*. In opposing the leadership of De Leon, these SLP members represented a widespread sentiment in the party. De Leon had implemented many changes

[45] Ibid.; "Emigration," *People*, June 14, 1891; Leo, "Immigration. Would its restriction limit home competition?", *People*, December 20, 1896.
[46] Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 7-42.

in the SLP, making it a stronger political movement. But his action had not always been successful or uncontroversial. For example, De Leon had always opposed any sort of cooperation with other political parties, both on the national and on the local level, causing distress among those militants who wanted to present joint tickets with the People's Party in the early 1890s. In the same period, he had adopted a vigorous strategy to enter the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Knights of Labor with socialist militants, attempting to capture the leadership of these federations in order to re-organise them according to socialist principles. However, when these attempts of "boring from within" had failed, in 1896 he had decided to found a new trade union federation, called the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance (STLA), closely tightened and directly controlled by the SLP leadership. By the end of the decade, when the contrasts within the SLP exploded, it had become evident that the STLA had only produced the result of weakening the position of socialists among American workers, even if De Leon and his followers were loath to admit it.[47] De Leon's adversaries were made more impatient by the electoral growth of the SLP. They thought that De Leon, with his stubborn opposition towards any change in the party's political strategy, was slowing the growth of a movement that had the potential to expand massively.[48]

Historians of the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and biographers of De Leon, such as David Shannon, Ira Kipnis, Glen Seretan, and, more recently, Jack Ross, have thoroughly explained the reasons at the heart of the split of 1899. De Leon's despotic attitude in running the party, his narrow-minded Marxist ideology and the controversial decision to found the STLA in opposition to the AFL and the Knights have been mentioned as the key reasons that caused the separation. All of these elements had a huge role in starting the quarrel within the SLP; however, the interpretative angle offered in this chapter may help to shed light on some aspects of the 1899 split traditionally neglected by historians. In my opinion, De Leon's strategy to "Americanise" the party, combined

[47] The group of historians who criticise De Leon's decision to found the STLA include: Perlman, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States*, 211; Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 15-25; Foster, *From Bryan to Stalin*, 35; Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the US*, 2:296-297. A different point of view is presented in: David Herreshoff, *American Disciples of Marx: The Origins of American Marxism, from the Transcendentalists to De Leon* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 123-129.
[48] Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States*, 301-339.

with his peculiar way of understanding race and ethnicity, had a role in causing the split and, in turn, in shaping the future of the SLP.[49]

De Leon's idea that the party needed to "Americanise" itself was not seen as a problem by the immigrant groups within the organisation, at least initially. In fact, in the 1890-1895 period De Leon could rely on the support of ethnic-based organisations such as the United Hebrew Trades, a Jewish federation of trade unions founded in New York in 1888, as well as the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* and German American trade unions. But the situation quickly changed. In 1896, during the ninth Convention of the party, a clause that stated that "no section or subdivision [of the party] shall be designated by race or nationality" was inserted into the SLP Constitution, suggesting the new direction the party was taking. At the same meeting the delegates discussed the problems within the Jewish socialist community of New York. Jewish immigrants had contributed significantly to the expansion of the party, opening twenty-five sections between 1889 and 1897. They had also pioneered the foundation of two of the most successful editorial enterprises in the socialist movement, the *Arbeter Tsaytung*, a weekly started in 1890, and *Dos Abend Blat*, a daily launched in 1895. By the time of the Convention, internal strife was stirring things up in the cooperative publishing association that controlled both publications over the relations between the association and the SLP. Some wanted to sever the connection with the socialist party; others wanted to remain loyal and influence its policy from within. The SLP Convention quickly dismissed the problem as something that Jewish members should solve themselves, and approved a resolution that determined that the political line within the association should be controlled by the N.E.C. of the party. This decision demonstrated the distance of the party leadership from the problems of its militants. By unilaterally imposing the SLP's control on the publishing association, the Convention weakened the position of the SLP supporters and accelerated the secession from the

[49] Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America*, 1-45; Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*; Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History*, 52-55.

party of a lively group of intellectuals, led by Abraham Cahan and Louis Miller, which in 1897 founded a new daily, the *Forverts*, and cut its ties with the party.[50]

But the main challenge to De Leon's activities came from the German American community. The *Volkszeitung* group included many of the leaders who had run the SLP until 1890 and had initially favoured De Leon's rise. Strong of their historical role and their popularity among German American workers, which was still one of the core constituencies of the party, these leaders did everything in their power to end De Leon's leadership. But De Leon had no hesitation in attacking his former political sponsors. His very arguments demonstrate that ethnicity continued to play a central role in shaping the SLP internal debate. In the sequence of articles published against the *Volkszeitung* leadership, De Leon took every occasion to point out the failure of the German American leadership to abide by the party's mission of spreading socialism among American workers. Reporting the opinions of his internal enemies during a party debate, De Leon wrote that "as a matter of course, THE PEOPLE came in for a full share of abuse, although most of its assailants do not and cannot read it, and none knows enough English to judge.[51] Elsewhere, De Leon expanded his argument, this time having recourse to the theme of "Americanising" the party. Speaking of the representatives of his opponent faction, he wrote:

> It is no accident that among these spokesmen is a Schlüter – only a temporary sojourner in this land, awaiting the expiration of the sentence against him to return to his home in Germany; it is no accident that among these spokesmen is a Dr. Halpern … - a gentleman, whose jovial countenance we may at any time miss from our midst, his heart being in Russia, whither he pants to return as soon as it may be safe to do so; it is no accident that amongst these spokesmen is a Feigenbaum – a member who only the other

[50] Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts*, 95-107.
[51] Daniel De Leon, "Signposts that will have to guide the party for the safe-keeping of a 'Daily People'," *People*, April 2, 1899.

day was seeking the perfect arrangements whereby he could fall on his feet back to Europe.[52]

Still, in 1899 De Leon was conceived of his mandate in the SLP as a mission to "Americanise" the party, and understood that its immigrant leaders, with their stubborn refusal to learn English and their attachment to their motherland, were an obstacle to his strategy. Confirmation of the fact that De Leon's strategy to Americanise the party was a heartfelt problem in the SLP comes from an article written after the split, when a member of the German American faction wrote in the anti-De Leon *People* (for some time after the split, two *Peoples* holding contrasting positions were published in New York): "For some years we have heard a great deal, from high quarters within the party, as to the necessity of an 'American socialist movement'.". But, he continued, "the Socialist Labor Party in America will never be 'American' in the sense of being anti-foreign."[53]

These sources reveal how ethnic hatred played a role in the 1899 split. The clash on party politics that took on in this period was also a clash on the ethnic features of the future socialist organisation, on the role of cultural and national belongings and on its relations with socialism. If only implicitly, De Leon's insisted attacks on his adversaries' immigrant statuses were connected with his understanding of race and ethnicity. As shown, the Marxist intellectual regarded race and ethnicity as matters of secondary importance. It is thus clear why he could not stomach his adversaries' stubbornness not to learn English and their willingness to go back to their home country. Once again, De Leon's strategy could be well intended, but its effects on the American socialist movement were far from positive. De Leon failed to see that immigrant communities – with their peculiar way of mixing political activism and cultural preservation – were precisely the means whereby socialism was making inroads in the US. He believed that socialism should be "Americanised", but he did not find a way to reconcile this aim with the retention of the party's traditional base: its predominantly German American members and leaders.

[52] Daniel De Leon, "The class struggle within the party," *People*, July 16, 1899.
[53] "'American' socialism," *People*, November 12, 1899.

## Conclusions

The 1899 split brought to an end a period in which the SLP had been a key incubator of ideas about race and ethnicity within the American socialist movement. Since its foundation in 1876, the socialist party had brought together radicals who sought original ways of applying the tenets of socialism to the solution of problems created by racial inequality in the country. De Leon's tenure as leader in the 1890s was a phase in which many tendencies that had become apparent in the earlier years reached final maturity. With his class-focused approach based on a synthesis between positivist organicism, anthropology and historical materialism, De Leon resolved a tension between opposing theories of race used by socialist members across the years to systematise the relationship between racial and economic equality. The SLP leader provided his interpretation of Marxian historical materialism, based on mechanist social evolutionism and the prioritising of class. The analysis of De Leon's writings shows that the he had a more sophisticated understanding of the role of race and ethnicity than what might appear at first sight, a sophistication obscured by his decision to emphasise class belonging over anything else.

Under De Leon, colour-blindness triumphed over the defence of approaches based on scientific racialism. The SLP upheld a clearer position based on racial equality, although it also embraced an approach based on the systematic denial of the importance of race relations in the country. This produced a paradox: the SLP grew in members and voters, expanded its reach in the South and found itself in a better position to assimilate African American members. These changed conditions were reflected in the fact that the SLP produced better analyses of the situation, at times working out viable strategies to integrate black workers. On the other hand, the constant tendency to downplay the importance of race relations and the vagueness of the political proposals put forward by the socialist party prevented any sort of significant interracial cooperation.

In parallel, the 1890s saw a dispute for the control of the party, which De Leon and his followers eventually won in 1899. Ethnic hatred played a role in it, with the anti-Deleonite faction

accusing the Marxist leader of imposing his strategy to "Americanise" the party and De Leon criticising his opponents for their inability to sever their ties from their ethnic communities. Ultimately, in the 1890s De Leon made many changes that reveal how important race and ethnicity were in this phase of the history of the socialist movement. But despite achieving some successes, De Leon's SLP still struggled to find the right way to defend workers' rights in America's multi-ethnic and multiracial society. De Leon's colour-blind approach solved the theoretical tension between the fight for economic justice and the defence of racial equality, but it failed to find ways to put this theory into practice.

# CONCLUSIONS:
# THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF COLOUR-BLIND SOCIALISM

When senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont announced his intention to run for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2016, media commentators said his chances of defeating the former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were slim at best. Pundits believed that the Democratic electorate would treat Sanders, the self-proclaimed socialist candidate with a radical platform, with great scepticism.[1] Despite these media predictions, during the 2016 Democratic primary campaign Sanders achieved impressive results. By June he had won a majority in more than twenty states, defeating Clinton in a number of key constituencies diversified for social and economic circumstances such as Michigan, Colorado and West Virginia. Sanders propelled a social movement that, despite failing to capture the nomination, may affect the future of the Democratic party for decades to come.[2]

Political scientists and journalists alike mention several reasons for Sanders ultimately losing the nomination to Hillary Clinton; however, perhaps the most striking was his complete inability to gather the support of the black electorate. Clinton won in many Southern states with extremely large differentials among African Americans. She defeated Sanders thanks to the support of 86 per cent of blacks in South Carolina and 85 per cent in Georgia. Sanders did slightly better in the North,

[1] Alan Rappeport, "Bernie Sanders, Long-Serving Independent, Enters Presidential Race as Democrat," *New York Times*, April 29, 2015. Accessed June 3, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/us/politics/bernie-sanders-campaign-for-president.html; Dan Merica, "Bernie Sanders is Running for President," *CNN News*, April 30, 2015. Accessed June 3, 2016, http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/29/politics/bernie-sanders-announces-presidential-run/.

[2] Wilson Andrews, Kitty Bennett, Alicia Parlapiano, "2016 Delegate Count and Primary Results," *New York Times*, June 2, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/primary-calendar-and-results.html; MJ Lee, "How Bernie Sanders Has Changed the Democratic Party," *CNN News*, May 11, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2016, http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/09/politics/bernie-sanders-democratic-party/.

for example in Michigan, although even there he got only 30 per cent of the black vote. Overall, his inability to reach out this key constituency of the Democratic Party was lethal for his campaign.[3]

Sanders's limited support among the black electorate brings back into sharp relief questions that are connected to the events described in this thesis – most strikingly the continued historical inability of American socialists to go beyond universalistic class-based measures to counteract specific forms of exploitation created by race. During the twentieth century, the failure of white-led socialist parties to address their own limits on race has produced a fracture in the American Left along racial lines. From the cases of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which were animated by former Socialist Party of America members W.E.B. Du Bois and Hubert Harrison respectively; to that of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s, whose program mixed policies inspired by socialism and the advocacy of Black Power, twentieth-century African American socialists wanting to re-claim their own place within the American society have found themselves much more comfortable *outside* rather than inside the institutional left.[4] History has repeated itself in recent years, when a series of homicides of African American citizens led to the birth of Black Lives Matter, a movement that despite sharing many political goals of the American left has developed once again well outside left-wing parties.[5]

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[3] Salim Muwakkil, "The Paradox of Bernie Sanders and the Black Voter," *In These Times*, April 12, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2016, http://inthesetimes.com/article/19020/why-arent-more-black-voters-supporting-bernie-sanders; Janell Ross, "Bernie Sanders Is Doing Better with Black Voters – But It's Still Not Good Enough," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/03/16/bernie-sanders-is-doing-better-with-black-voters-but-its-still-not-good-enough/.

[4] On the limits of the Socialist Party of America, cf. Sally M. Miller, *Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Early Twentieth-Century American Socialism* (New York; London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison. The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2008), 141-242. Several books have explored the relationship between black movements and the left in the twentieth century. A short selection include: C. L. R. James, *C. L. R. James on the "Negro Question,"* ed. Scott McLemee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996); Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: an Analytical History* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969); Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy and Society* (Boston: South End Press, 1983); Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: the Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London; New York: Verso, 2012); Michael C. Dawson, *Blacks In and Out of the Left* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2013); Clarence Lang, *Black America in the Shadow of the Sixties: Notes on the Civil Rights Movement, Neoliberalism and Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[5] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

The events discussed in this thesis have brought us back to the origins of the problematic relationship between radical racial minority movements and the American left, and a moment before this institutional fracture between them had taken place. By focusing on the Gilded Age period this thesis has discussed the first period in which American socialists confronted with some degree of regularity race and its impact on social and economic circumstances. This investigation has shown how the American socialist movement came to embrace a colour-blind approach on race and ethnicity. In the reconstruction of this process, and in the analysis of its consequences, this thesis has shed light on some explanations of the problematic relationship between socialism and race across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The colour-blind approach – initially brought in the party by trade unionists like Friedrich A. Sorge and J. McDonnell and later successfully turned into policy by Daniel De Leon – was a straightforward application of the internationalist and class-based philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. For convinced Marxists in and around the SLP the key question was not whether this philosophy dealt adequately with how race and class intersected, but rather how to put this philosophy into practice through political strategy. But for many other socialists in the same circles, things were not so clear-cut. Many were beguiled not only by the ideal of international class solidarity, but also by evolutionary theories of race, which could be construed to suggest that lines of division between human beings could be as significant as lines of connection. Such theories, rooted in scientific understanding, could not be easily dismissed. On the contrary, by finding ways to integrate these ideas into their socialism, many SLP members thought they would establish their political credibility.[6] The dilemma faced by late nineteenth-century American socialists, then, could be framed in these terms: how should socialists respond to those who maintained that racial minorities such as African Americans, Chinese immigrants and Native Americans were not to be regarded on an equal footing with the white Europeans or their descendants in the US, simply because they were not at the same stage of development as the "superior white culture"? Some

[6] Pittenger, *American Socialists and Evolutionary Thought*, 70.

responded to this question by accepting the pervasive argument against racial equality, and incorporating prejudicial ideas or practices into their socialist rhetoric and activism. But many responded in a different way, by acknowledging the existence of different races, nations and peoples and at the same time insisting on their fundamental equality, and affirming that within their socialism.

Late nineteenth-century socialists reacted to the issue of racial diversity with a heterogeneity and sophistication that have rarely been recognised by historians. This thesis has shown that many factors need to be contemplated in order to describe thoroughly the variation of opinions expressed by socialists. Among the aspects explored in this investigation were the impact of German culture on German American thought, generational differences within the German American community, and geographical variation in the centres of American socialism. Each of these elements has contributed to show how socialist opinions evolved across time, according to the people who expressed them and where they were formulated. Similarly, by splitting the socialist discourse on race into different themes, further varieties have come to the fore. Socialists discussing Chinese immigration used an extremely specific set of stereotypes on Oriental culture, the same way in which SLP members writing on African Americans and Native Americans relied upon intellectual discourses centred on chattel slavery and civilisation respectively. In the period under scrutiny in this thesis, socialists faced public discourses that favoured the exclusion of African Americans on the basis of their "natural ineptitude" to succeed economically and socially; that rejected Chinese immigrants arguing that they came from an intrinsically servile culture, which was incompatible with the free habits of the white culture; that invoked the extermination of Native Americans, using the argument that their nature was inevitably un-civilised and hostile to the white lifestyle. Ultimately, colour-blind socialism was the answer to these widespread and strong racist beliefs. Firstly formulated by early German American immigrants during the 1860s and 1870s in the context of debates over slavery and Reconstruction, colour-blind socialism was later used by De Leon to reorient the party under his leadership in the 1890s. By choosing this approach, SLP

members wanted to emancipate racial minorities from pseudo-scientific ideologies that still oppressed them. At the same time, by downplaying race and ethnicity, socialists attempted to rearticulate the public discourse on an economic level – a level that, so they believed, was more adequate to pursue and achieve racial equality.

But the tendency of many socialists to prioritise class over race was also the result of socialists' limits in understanding social circumstances in the country. On more than one occasion, SLP members proved unable to understand how deeply racial relations shaped dynamics of oppression and inequality in the US. Significantly, socialists often showed that they did not have the intellectual structures required to understand how oppression based on race worked. They failed to systematise this specific form of discrimination within their theoretical framework, creating a blind spot that hampered their ability to represent racial minorities from a political point of view.

Historians have shown the limits of colour-blind socialism. From the 1970s onwards, many have argued that the repeated failure of white-led socialist movements to include racial minorities is motivated precisely by the inability of white socialists to go beyond their universal colour-blind approach. The history of the twentieth century, this school of thought maintains, demonstrates that left-wing movements have managed to build multiracial efforts only when a real understanding of the specific dynamics of oppression caused by race has been prioritised and has been made the starting point for political action. Take the example of the Communist Party of the USA in the 1920s and 1930s, one of the few periods in the history of the left in which African Americans felt at ease within a Communist or a Socialist Party. This success was built on the decision of the party leadership to recognise the African American community as an "oppressed nation within a nation" and build its politics of race around this conviction.[7]

By investigating the origins of colour-blind socialism, this thesis revises this historiography in several ways. It shows that colour-blind socialism was not the inevitable outcome of the debate on

[7] Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (Westport, Conn.; London: Greenwood Press, 1977); for details on the policy towards racial minorities in the Communist Party, I referred to Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and U.S. Communism, 1919-1929* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2014), 287-351.

race going on in the socialist movement at the end of the century, and that alternative perspectives need to be rescued from historical oblivion. The late-1870s SLP was a lively political community. It had cradles in industrial cities such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, Chicago and Detroit that produced independent analysis and contributed to the intellectual debate within the organisation, as dailies such as the *Volksstimme des Westens* and the *Arbeiter Zeitung* well attest. Its immigrant leaders brought original ideas to the American socialist milieu. These communities, which discussed race within a scientific racialist framework, produced ideas that were strikingly opposed to the colour-blind approach adopted in the 1890s and throughout the twentieth century. The evaluation of scientific racialist points of view is necessarily twofold: on the one hand, they stood on the premise that human beings were intrinsically unequal and that this inequality was not meant to disappear – a premise that was incompatible with the message of universalist egalitarianism upon which socialism was founded. Yet, on the other hand, by recognising the irreducible diversity of human beings, they produced intellectual elaborations that went deeper in their attempts to combine socialism and race than those of their colour-blind comrades. Nineteenth-century scientific racialist socialists *saw* race as an element that produced distinctive identitarian experiences and peculiar forms of economic exploitation, and they looked for ways to integrate these understandings within socialism. This put them in a similar position as twentieth-century socialists, who faced the need to integrate socialism and the search for identitarian self-emancipation of racial minorities. In this sense, then, the 1890s switch to colour-blind socialism was detrimental for the American socialist movement: although it restricted the space to advocate racial inequality, it erased possible alternative points of view that might have more profitably addressed thorny issues destined to remain in decades to come.

To be sure, the scientific racialist point of view was not completely lost in the 1890s: within that position it is necessary to differentiate between those who advocated biological racialism and those who discussed race using anthropology, and therefore divided nations and human groups according to their level of social and cultural development. As seen in Chapter Six, while biological

racialism disappeared in the 1890s, theories of cultural and social development were rearticulated within De Leon's mechanist evolutionism. De Leon himself showed a sensitiveness towards problems of race and ethnicity that was absent from the thinking of many earlier leaders, but despite these factors in the 1890s it is not possible to find the same level of originality and innovativeness observed in the late 1870s and early 1880s.

But this investigation into late nineteenth-century socialist racial thought leads also to reconsider the description of "colour-blind socialism" presented by Foner in the 1970s. In a recent reassessment of the racial thought of the Socialist Party of America's leader Eugene Debs, historian William Jones sheds light on the multiple ways in which Debs fought for racial equality while at the same time holding a colour-blind point of view. Jones concludes saying that "by uncritically repeating Foner's interpretation of Debs's racial politics, scholars continue to overlook a rich history of antiracism within the Socialist Party."[8] The same considerations must be expanded to colour-blind positions advocated in the SLP during the 1870s and 1890s. The problem is that historiographical debates on colour-blind socialism have given a too simplistic representation of the positions held by socialists between the end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, failing to acknowledge virtuous cases of anti-racism such as Debs's and failing to investigate much further causes that could explain the shortcomings of socialists. The analysis of SLP's ideas at the end of the nineteenth century has shown that socialists, even if in precarious and inconsistent way, addressed the problems deriving from inequality based on race. While they achieved both successes and failures, they put forward sophisticated points of view that the label "colour-blind" simply does not help to describe.

This thesis has also shown some recurrent problems historians need to acknowledge when discussing the relationship socialism and race during the Gilded Age. For example, the fact of being typically rooted in white working class communities, which lacked a direct engagement with non-white workers and groups, remained a constant feature of the SLP throughout its earlier period, and

[8] Cf. William P. Jones, "'Nothing Special to Offer the Negro': Revisiting the "'Debsian View' of the Negro Question," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008), 212-224.

explains many of the difficulties of socialists in understanding the social and economic effects caused by racial discrimination. The impact of scientific theories of race, Darwinism, and anthropology, and the complicated ways in which they were married with historical materialism, further helps to explain why socialists lingered in positions that acknowledged and justified inequality. The impact of German culture in shaping socialist thought, finally, is another circumstance that increased socialists' inability to understand circumstances of inequality caused by race.

Finally, the discussion on socialism and race presented in this thesis suggests that it is necessary to find new ways to re-discuss and re-conceptualise colour-blindness within contemporary radical discussions on the left that aim to solve both economic and racial inequalities. In the last thirty years, "colour-blind" has become the label used to denounce the tendency of neoliberal narratives to describe the American society as "post-racial", where race no longer plays a role in determining social and economic dynamics. Anti-racist intellectuals have rightly rejected this paradigm, by emphasising how, on income, incarceration rates, and social mobility for example, race still shapes social and economic relations in the US.[9] During the 2016 primaries the accusation of colour-blindness has been extended to Bernie Sanders, who during his campaign argued that the disparities between different racial groups should be resolved by improving general economic conditions rather than by implementing minority-targeted measures such as reparations for African Americans.[10] The debate surrounding Sanders's campaign has moved along lines that revived the clash of the 1960s and 1970s over identity politics and its effects on the unity of the movement for

[9] Eduardo Bonilla Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).
[10] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Why Precisely is Bernie Sanders Against Reparations?," *Atlantic*, January 19, 2016, Accessed July 1, 2016, http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/bernie-sanders-reparations/424602/; Janell Ross, "Bernie Sanders's Real Problem With Black and Hispanic Voters," *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2016, https://newrepublic.com/article/130958/bernies-revolution-white-win?utm_medium=social&utm_source=nfrb&utm_campaign=20160301; Jeet Heer, "Bernie's Revolution is Too White to Win," *New Republic*, March 2, 2016. Accessed June 3, 2016, https://newrepublic.com/article/130958/bernies-revolution-white-win?utm_medium=social&utm_source=nfrb&utm_campaign=20160301.

racial equality.[11] The article exchange between the African American editorialist Ta-Nehisi Coates and the African American academic Cedric Johnson in the pages of *The New Atlantic* and *Jacobin* during the primary campaign was emblematic of this theoretical rift. On one side, Coates accused Sanders of failing "in the ancient fight against white supremacism" by rejecting more radical policies against race discrimination such as the demand for reparations and by proposing a "'class-first' approach, originating in the myth that racism and socialism are necessarily incompatible." Sanders, according to Coates, has shown a shyness in his platform on race that has brought him much closer to Democratic orthodoxy than to the radicalism expected by a candidate that aimed to subvert present economic and social conditions.[12] On the other side, Johnson replied arguing that Coates's point of view was forgetful of the class dynamics underpinning fights for racial equality. Johnson connected Coates's approach to identitarian fights of the twentieth century: "[Coates's] reparation argument is rooted in black nationalist politics, which traditionally elides class and neglects the way that race-first politics are often the means for advancing discrete, bourgeois class interests." Labelling the reparation argument as a "territorial-identitarian" claim advanced primarily by "national black political elites and antiracist liberals" in the "shifting landscape of multicultural capitalism," Johnson concluded that Coates's "particular brand of antiracism does more political harm than good, further mystifying the actual forces at play and the real battle lines that divided our world."[13]

The way in which Sanders's campaign developed, from its troubled relationship with Black Lives Matter to its poor results amongst African Americans, shows that the American socialist left is still far away from reaching a fruitful way to interact politically with the racial minorities of the country. But the analysis of the past presented in this thesis suggests that the way to solve this issue is not by abandoning the egalitarian and universal message of emancipation that characterises the

[11] Dawson, *Blacks In and Out*, 129-161.
[12] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Bernie Sanders and the Liberal Imagination," *The Atlantic*, January 24, 2016. Accessed July 10, 2016, http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/01/bernie-sanders-liberal-imagination/425022/.
[13] Cedric Johnson, "An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates and All the Liberals Whio Love Him," *Jacobin*, February 3, 2016. Accessed July 10, 2016, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/02/ta-nehisi-coates-case-for-reparations-bernie-sanders-racism/.

socialist political project and is grounded in class analysis. Rather, political strategies and practices should seek to combine universalism with an adequate recognition of racial oppression as a feature of socio-economic relations, alongside and independently of class. To detail the practical measures required to achieve this objective is beyond the scope of the historical investigation undertaken in these pages. But the facts analysed suggest that the only contribution that American socialism can give to the cause of racial equality is to bring forward the conversation started by leaders such as Peter H. Clark, Adolph Douai and Daniel De Leon more than a century ago and find a way to marry the fight against racism with the universal struggle for better living conditions brought forward by American and international socialist workers.

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