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Left-wing Radicalism in the United States: A Foreign Creed?

Introduction: A Significant Other

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Introduction: A Significant Other[1]

Alice Béja

1 In his 2019 State of the Union address, former president Donald J. Trump spoke about the United States officially recognizing Juan Guaido as president of Venezuela, and condemned "the brutalities of the Maduro regime, whose socialist policies have turned that nation from being the wealthiest in South America into a state of abject poverty and despair." In the very next sentence, he railed against "new calls to adopt socialism in our country" and vowed "that America [would] never be a socialist country." By associating socialism with a foreign country, he was taking up the perspective of an October 2018 report of the Council of Economic Advisors, "The Opportunity Costs of Socialism," which analyzed the economic consequences of socialism in several countries (Maoist China, the Soviet Union, Cuba, Scandinavian countries) before moving on to an analysis of the "Medicare for all" policy proposed by a wing of the Democratic Party. He was also reviving a political rhetoric that has periodically flourished in the United States, depicting left-wing radicalism, whether embodied by socialism, anarchism, communism, or democratic socialism, as fundamentally incompatible with American values—a foreign creed.

2 The history of the United States has been marked by regular instances of violent repression against those activists on the left that were perceived as presenting a threat to the political and economic system governing the country. The repression was often disproportionate to the forces that the movements they belonged to represented: starting with the "crisis of freedom" of the 1790s (Foner, 1994 43), when the Alien and Sedition Acts associated the idea of the foreigner with that of the traitor, moments of national crisis were coupled with a search for an "other" that could be excluded from the national polity, regardless of their nationality. As William Preston, Jr., has shown in his seminal *Aliens and Dissenters*, from the end of the nineteenth century, this rhetoric crystallized around left-wing radicals, often depicted as aliens, influenced by foreign ideologies, or "un-American," a term that gained in popularity at the turn of the twentieth century. It was transcribed into legislation and federal campaigns of repression and deportation: the 1903 Immigration Act banning anarchists from entering the United States, the Sedition and Espionage Acts of 1917-1918, which led to the arrest and imprisonment of Eugene Debs and the I.W.W. trial, the 1919-1920 Red

Scare, the Smith Act of 1940, and the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950, which underpinned the actions of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

3 Determining the boundaries of national identity and belonging was also a battle for public opinion. It produced concepts (Theodore Roosevelt's "true Americanism"), popularized words ("un-American") and led radicals to give their own version of what being American meant, rephrasing national ideals through their internationalist beliefs. When Emma Goldman was stripped of her American citizenship in 1909, she wrote a "New Declaration of Independence," in which she embedded anarchist beliefs within the founding document of the American nation. Voltairine de Cleyre showed how anarchism was deeply rooted in the political tradition of the United States in "Anarchism and American Traditions" and spent her life redefining the nation and its borders. During the Popular Front period, Earl Browder, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), famously declared: "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism," thus contributing to the appropriation of patriotic tropes by radicals. More recently, Democratic Representative Ilan Omar, in response to President Trump's attacks on her and other congresswomen's supposed lack of patriotism, referenced the radical message of the Declaration of Independence to place herself firmly within the United States' republican tradition.[2] Radicals used "nationalistic recuperation"[3] (Kühnis 167) in order to defend themselves against accusations of foreignness and debunk the rhetoric of "un-Americanism" associated with the political beliefs they held, in contexts when the government deployed both legislation and rhetoric to ban them from the national polity.

4 The dialectic between othering and reappropriation, which characterizes significant periods of the political history of radicalism in the United States, is also apparent in its historiography: the development of the consensus school of history in the 1940s and 1950s created a frame of reference in which radicalism—especially communism—was construed as fundamentally alien to the development of political ideas in the United States. Richard Hofstadter, with *The American Political Tradition* (1948), and Louis Harz, with *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955), structured what came to be called "American exceptionalism" by placing radicalism outside the pale of US political identity. To a certain extent, this marginalization was reinforced by writers like Daniel Bell and Nathan Glazer, who, while demonstrating the failure of communism in the United States, also showed why it could not have succeeded, taking up some of the classical arguments outlined by Werner Sombart in his 1906 *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* The movement towards the reappropriation of radical history started in the 1960s and 1970s, with books by James Weinstein, James Green, Mari-Jo Buhle, and many others, firmly reclaiming the United States' radical tradition with detailed studies of specific regions or social groups. In this perspective, which culminated in the publication of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of America*, conflict and dissent were placed at the heart of US history, and left-wing radicalism[4] was no longer portrayed as a foreign import but as central to social struggles for freedom and equality in the country.[5]

5 In more recent years, especially since the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, there has been a resurgence in democratic socialist politics as well as the study of the left in the United States, with a focus on issues of race and gender and a transnational perspective that seeks to go beyond the exceptionalist framework that has for so long determined many analyses of radicalism in US-American studies: in his preface to Christopher

Phelps and Robin Vandome's *Marxism and America*, Nelson Lichtenstein thus writes that "it is refreshing to find that the stale controversy over the extent to which capitalism and the working-class movement in the United States are 'exceptional' is for the most part missing from these pages." In spite of this welcome desire to go beyond the particular brand of nationalism that is the exceptionalist perspective, in their introduction to the book, Phelps and Vandome still take up the question of the compatibility of Marxism with US history, when asking "Is the United States innately insusceptible to Marxism?" Similarly, books on the American left often bear in their titles the desire to legitimize radicalism within US history, to show that, far from being a foreign creed, it is deeply rooted in the political traditions of the country: *Left Americana* (Paul LeBlanc), *American Dreamers* (Michael Kazin), *Dissent: The History of an American Idea* (Ralph Young). The perceived failure of anarchism, communism, and socialism to take root in the United States feeds this necessity to legitimize, not only the existence of the left in the United States, but its achievements. In the process, the risk of essentializing American values can never be completely eschewed.

6 The articles and interviews in this issue do not evade this risk, but wish to confront it. By analyzing the dynamic of foreignness and reappropriation that characterizes the position of left-wing radicalism within US-American political and cultural history, they showcase rhetorical strategies which reuse patriotic or nationalist tropes while seeking to avoid the pitfalls of nationalism. In other words, while exceptionalism as an analytical tool has proven its inadequacy, the rhetoric of America as an exceptional nation with a distinct political character is recurrent in US history and still represents a powerful tool to mobilize against a political "other." As Constance Bantman and Bert Alena have shown, the category of the nation should not be dismissed in the study of internationalist movements, for activists themselves were working within national contexts and therefore had to confront the concept of the nation-state. So the question is not so much whether references to the nation are contradictory with such movements and ideologies, but how they manage to redefine the boundaries of the nation in order to make it consistent with their internationalist beliefs.

7 This redefinition necessarily builds on the dominant conception of the nation, on how a government, a public opinion, define the boundaries of belonging. Jean-Louis Marin-Lammelet shows in his article how the essentialization of American identity at the turn of the twentieth century coincided with the identification of radicals as a political "other." Through a semiotic analysis of the term "un-American," which became more and more commonly used, he shows how language participated in the naturalization of nationalism, by creating a term which designated "a citizen of the United States deprived of American qualities" ("un habitant des États-Unis sans qualités américaines"). Marin-Lammelet also shows that, in their efforts to reappropriate the term and level it at their adversaries,[6] radicals themselves could, ironically, contribute to the essentialization of US ideals. They were, however, unable to durably discard the stigma of foreignness, which crystallized during the First World War with the incarceration of Eugene Debs, the I.W.W. trial, and the first Red Scare. This semiotic study of the term "un-American" shows the construction and deconstruction of national identity, the way in which a nation defines its "other." At the turn of the twentieth century, as Marin-Lammelet demonstrates, the struggle for belonging quickly moved from legislation to public opinion and became a battle to define who could or could not call themselves American.

8 Radical circles were multilingual and relied on foreign-language newspapers to disseminate news within a community, as with the development of the Yiddish radical press at the turn of the twentieth century in New York and other major cities (Zimmer). Translation therefore was a way to convey news about the United States to those who could not read English and make radical texts written in other languages available to a wider US audience. Rita Filanti, in her article on Voltairine de Cleyre, shows how de Cleyre saw translation as an intrinsically political, anarchistic act. By translating from and to various languages (English, French, and Yiddish) and teaching English to Jewish immigrants in Philadelphia, she underwent a process of "othering" herself that nourished her vision of an alternative community. In translating French anarchist Jean Grave, or Spanish pedagogue and revolutionist Francisco Ferrer, she created links between anarchist communities in the United States and continental Europe; in teaching English, she brought Jewish immigrants closer to the country they inhabited, while legitimizing their own language by learning Yiddish herself. "Translation, as Filanti writes, was therefore the most anarchistic of de Cleyre's activities, as it is precisely via translation that she realized those ideals of a co-operative, anti-authoritarian, non-sexist society that she was fighting for." In de Cleyre's work, we find an original way of rooting anarchism in the United States while never succumbing to the sirens of patriotism; hers is a vision of the nation that is decorrelated from the state and can then become, through the defamiliarizing practices of translating and learning new languages, "nonpolitical, multiethnic, and plurilingual."

9 The other pieces in this issue show how radicals built alternative narratives to inscribe dissent in American genealogy and questioned the borders of the nation by creating imagined communities that undermined the discourse of repression. This cultural approach, in a wide sense, has informed many important works on left-wing radicalism, by Daniel Aaron, Barbara Foley, Michael Denning, and more recently Zoe Trodd or Michael Kazin (2011). These books have sought to trace the enduring influence of the left on US culture in spite of what has consistently been portrayed as its political failure. The cultural industry has indeed contributed to what Denning called the "laboring" of American culture, Americanizing themes and ideas that could not find a political expression in US institutions; but, as Adam Nemmers demonstrates in this issue with his study of the posterity of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, cultural posterity can also de-emphasize the radical content of works of art through the process of mainstreaming, "shifting readers' attention away from the novels' essentially radical messages and toward such flashpoints as food safety, obscenity, and family." Portraying the Joads as a resilient family in the face of adversity and *The Jungle* as a gruesome documentary on meat production in the United States does away with Sinclair's socialist message and Steinbeck's indictment of corporate greed. The disqualification of such novels because of their sentimentality and supposed lack of literary merit also erases their political content. Integration within the canon comes, if it ever does, with the shedding of a message perceived as too radical.

10 What happens, then, when it is not the works of art which are under scrutiny, but the artists themselves? Jodie Childers, in describing the auditions of Pete Seeger and Paul Robeson before HUAC, speaks of their testimonies as "performances," showing how they adopt strategies enabling them to reverse "the power dynamics of the inquisition, effectively putting the committee on trial in the court of public opinion." Pete Seeger

presented himself as the archetypal country folk, the epitome of American authenticity, and a Capraesque defender of freedom. In so doing, he reappropriated American values in the defense of his own beliefs, implying that he, as a radical, was more truly American than the men who were interrogating him. Robeson, while also putting the committee on trial, did so from a different standpoint, forcing its members to acknowledge the history of racism in the United States. He placed them on the side of white supremacy while anchoring himself in the tradition of American abolitionism and the international fight against Western colonialism.

11 The focus on performance and rhetorical strategies serves to show that mastering language was crucial to shifting the boundaries of belonging within the nation; when the definition of who is American and who is not shifts from the realm of the law (citizen / non-citizen) to the allegiance to values (American / un-American), words matter. De Cleyre's transnational politics and Robeson's simultaneous denunciation of racism and the nation state both represent alternative narratives to the othering of radicalism and the essentialization of national values. By the same token, ironically, they also manifest the inescapable national framework within which an internationalist creed and a transnational perspective on the nation come into being.

12 The study of such alternatives is relevant to the contemporary political situation. While academics may have moved beyond the question of whether or not radicals are "American," or whether or not socialism is intrinsically unfit for the United States, the trope of radicalism as a foreign threat still has considerable leverage in contemporary political discourse. With the growing polarization of US politics, the enduring divisions manifested and exacerbated by the Trump presidency and the popularity of democratic socialism, there has been a resurgence in discussions of what is and is not "American." The word "un-American" has gained new traction and was dubbed "political insult of the moment" by *The New York Times* in March 2017 (Gage).[7] On 29 October 2020, Donald Trump wrote on his Facebook account: "This election is a choice between the AMERICAN DREAM and a SOCIALIST NIGHTMARE. Our opponents want to turn America into Communist Cuba or Socialist Venezuela. As long as I am President, America will NEVER be a socialist Country!"

13 It is in this context that director Yael Bridge chose to make a documentary film on socialism in the United States, featuring several people (a teacher in Oklahoma, a legislator in Virginia, a cooperative worker in Ohio…) and telling the history of a still maligned political tradition. Significantly, she entitled it *The Big Scary "S" Word*, and says in the interview she gave for this issue that her aim was to build a counternarrative to what is said about socialism in the mainstream media: "One of the goals of the movie is precisely to let socialists define socialism for themselves, rather than confront them with the definitions that society as a whole has of socialism." With the birth of movements like #MeToo or Black Lives Matter, the popularity of Bernie Sanders, and the growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), there appears to be a space for such counter-narratives on the history and future of left-wing radicalism. As Mathieu Bonzom shows in the interview he gave for this issue, one of the most eloquent and successful attempts to revive the radical tradition on the left in the realm of ideas is *Jacobin*, the magazine founded in 2010 by Bhaskar Sunkara, whose aim is to address contemporary political issues while reviving the history of the left in the United States and maintaining an internationalist perspective. It is not always an easy balance to achieve, but the founders of *Jacobin* deliberately seek to address as wide an

audience as possible, and in so doing do away with the image of the radical that still scares many, including the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

14 Left-wing radicalism remains a "significant other" in contemporary US politics, and the accusations of foreignness and un-Americanism are rooted in a long history of exclusion and reappropriation,[8] a complex relationship to the idea of the nation which can produce fecund alternatives or enduring marginalization. As Anna Triandafyllidou argues, the process of othering is highly historicized in the construction of nations:

> Significant others also become salient in periods of social, political, or economic crisis during which the identity of the nation is put in question. The significant other in these cases serves in overcoming the crisis because it unites the people in front of a common enemy, it reminds them "who we are" and emphasizes that "we are different and unique." (603)

The left today in the United States still has to contend with this process and find rhetorical strategies to evade it or defuse it, as evidenced in a 2015 speech by Senator Bernie Sanders, in which he defined what democratic socialism meant for him. In replying to those who equated socialism with foreignness and totalitarianism, he described his ideal society in pragmatic terms, as one of equality and opportunity. He expressed his admiration for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lyndon B. Johnson. Like many before him, he reused the language of patriotism to legitimize his political beliefs, declaring: "I don't believe in some foreign 'ism,' but I believe deeply in American idealism" (Prokop).

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NOTES

1. The term “significant other” has been used by Anna Triandafyllidou to describe the dual nature of the concept of nation, its definition in relation to internal and external factors of cohesion and division. In “National Identity and the ‘Other,’” she writes: “The feature that makes some other group a ‘significant other’ is the fact that it is perceived to pose a threat to the existence of the nation” (600). While Triandafyllidou relates this idea mainly to other nations or ethnic groups within a nation, it is a concept that is useful to describe the “othering” of left-wing radicalism in US political history.

2. In a press conference on 16 July 2019, she declared: “This country was founded on the radical idea that we are created equal and endowed by our creator with unalienable rights,” after Trump claimed, in a thinly veiled reference to her and other members of the “Squad”: “These are people that, in my opinion, hate our country” (Diavolo).

3. “Nationalistic recuperation” is a term used by Nino Kühnis to analyze the ways in which anarchists in Switzerland at the end of the nineteenth century reused national myths and archetypal Swiss virtues to attribute them to anarchists, legitimizing their political beliefs and methods.

4. The title of this issue voluntarily refers to “left-wing radicalism,” focusing on the way in which political beliefs were presented or perceived (*radical* as opposed to reformist or progressive) rather than on the ideological framework of these beliefs (socialism, communism, anarchism, Marxism…). The definition of who is and is not a “radical” is inherently dependent on who uses the word and the political context in which it appears, contrary to more stable terms defining an ideology or a political theory.

5. These few sentences do little justice to the wealth of works on US radicalism and to the different approaches that characterize them. Readers will find some of them mentioned in the bibliography at the end of the introduction. A useful synthesis of debates on the history of the American left is Michael Kazin’s introduction to the 1996 edition of Daniel Bell’s *Marxian Socialism in the United States*.

6. Cheryl Hudson shows how the term was used at the end of the nineteenth century by adversaries of Pullman in the context of the strike. Progressives like Jane Addams, for instance, leveled this criticism not at the unions, but at Pullman and his corporation.

7. The newfound popularity of “un-American” is on a par with the versatility of its meaning, which is as great as it was at the end of the nineteenth century. In August 2021, it was used in US media to describe vaccine mandates (CBN News), refusing the vaccine (*The Conversation*), Senator Warren’s tax plan (Fox Business), critical race theory (WTVC), not supporting the US basketball team in the Olympics (Fox Sports Radio), and the January 6 attack against the Capitol (The White House).

8. The left’s problematic relationship with ideas of the nation and national identity is of course not exclusive to the United States. See for example Martigny.

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Sciences Po Lille, CERAPS