

Note from the Editor

Of the appeals to ignorance blustered during the recent presidential campaign, the notion that the new president is a closet socialist would count among the most ridiculous, if one did not have to contend with the unshakable belief of some that the officialdom of Hawaii has conspired to cover up the Kenyan birth of a clandestine Muslim who is in turn covering up his despise-the-real-America sensibility, imbibed from an unrepentant Weatherman in his circle of acquaintances. To be fair, depressing nonsense kicked around on the other side, too; many would prefer to spread rumors about the birth spacing and parenting arrangements of the former Republican vice-presidential candidate than to stick to emphasizing this candidate's cluelessness about international relations, public finance, and almost every other pressing national issue.

Others can more accurately categorize the new president's ideology, but it probably resembles an updated social democracy or urban liberalism, leavened by appreciation of the neoliberal and neo-progressive critiques of the welfare state and concentrated authority that have appeared in recent decades. This counts as "socialism" only to minds capable of taking at face value the Victorian rhetorical flourishes that made all public-sector activity more extensive than constables and cobblestones appear dangerously socialistic. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of international political thought over the last thirty years knows that as a positive program for running countries, socialism is deader than the mastodon. Geneticists might have more success with reviving the mastodon than Chicago education professors would socialism.

Those paying attention at the time were aware, often painfully aware, that by the early 1980s socialism—as distinguished from social democracy, neo-progressivism, regulated capitalism, and similar imperfections—had ceased to live as a positive idea among the general public outside the Soviet bloc. Socialism's loss of broad appeal in the Western representative democracies preceded the events of 1989–90, which among other things dramatized the feebleness of socialism's residual, ritualistic attraction even in the Soviet bloc, where people had been indoctrinated in its abstract virtues for decades.

Surely some of the enthusiasm for radical free marketeering in the 1980s came from its having temporary monopoly of all-encompassing social visions. By that time, socialists talked about the history of political economy and their visions for it in oblique or routine ways that lacked heart as well as specificity. Among left-of-center academics, the turn toward cultural critique sometimes seemed like a retreat into picking apart—deconstructing—other people's notions of society, economy, and politics, rather than researching, analyzing, and debating society, economy, and politics themselves.

The intense interest of the writings of Alan Dawley, whose premature death last year prompted the memorial and assessment in this issue, comes from his obvious understanding of the intellectual implications of socialism's deflation as a definite vision. Dawley's *Class and Community* (1976) is one of the last noteworthy works of academic history organized around the Sombart question: Why is there no socialism in the United States? Despite its vivid account of the experience of industrialization among shoeworkers in Lynn, the book seemed dated and forced as political analysis by the time I read it in 1984. But Dawley never gave up the notion that political economy belonged at the heart of history. And he never gave up pushing and searching for a new vision of American society and its role in the world—as a person, as Anne Marie Nicolosi recounts, and as a historian, as Ian Tyrrell explains. Even when one disagreed with Dawley, one appreciated what he was trying to find and the effort that he devoted to his search.

Even though *Struggles for Justice* (1991) did receive a large amount of attention when it appeared, this book may still have been misunderstood and underappreciated. At the time, the book seemed to this reader to be a sustained and brave attempt to examine the American reformist tradition, from populism through progressivism to New Deal liberalism, as a viable mixed-economy vision of its own and not as a truncated, watered-down alternative to socialism (the dismissive view often taken on the Left). In the nearly two decades since *Struggles for Justice*, Dawley's insistence that progressivism and liberalism had to be understood simultaneously as products of American conditions and as American manifestations of transnational reformist impulses has become commonplace among political historians.

As Tyrrell explains in his remarks on *Changing the World* (2003), Dawley struggled to find ways to discuss American humanitarian progressivism as a basis for American action in the world, but this difficulty he shared with a century of American internationalists and transnationalists. People in many countries seem to have greeted the recent U.S. election as an example of the American reformist tradition in action, of those aspects in that tradition that they would wish to emulate and do not fear. With his strong roots in the New Left, Dawley probably would find much to criticize in the centrist and pragmatist administration taking shape, but he certainly would have wished to participate in a renewed American attempt to make itself more of a model and less of a force.

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